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# A framework for improving the international collaboration between Brazilian and UK universities





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# Introduction



The development of successful international partnerships is a function of a range of factors and elements relating to the internal and external environment of higher education<sup>1</sup>. The current study identifies three elements that form a framework, summarised in figure 1, for the development of sustainable international partnerships: 1) the existence of an enabling policy framework; 2) the presence at university level of a clearly defined and appropriately resourced international strategy; and 3) the broader factor conditions and external environment in the countries involved.

An enabling policy framework is one that includes clearly defined and easily accessible requirements for each of the different types of international partnerships and provision for the recognition of foreign qualifications. At university level, a key prerequisite is the existence of an international strategy with measurable objectives and dedicated resources for its successful implementation. The factor conditions and external environment that support the development and sustainability of international partnerships include the proficiency in foreign languages, the quality of secondary education, the quality of human capital, the IT infrastructure, and the country's capacity for research and innovation<sup>1</sup>.

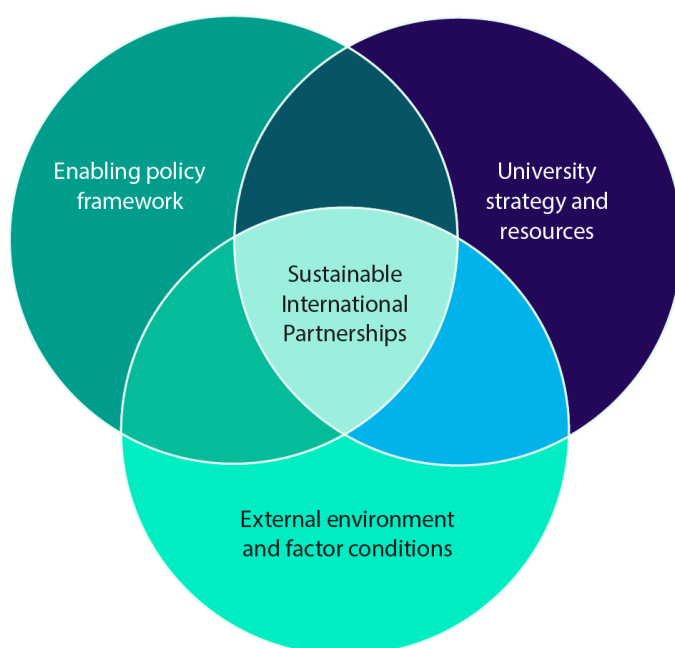


Figure 1. A framework for the development of sustainable international partnerships

<sup>1</sup> Tsiligiris, V. (2018). An adapted Porter Diamond Model for the evaluation of transnational education host countries. *International Journal of Educational Management*.

Reflecting on the above broader framework, this guide provides practical advice and policy recommendations on how to improve the international links between Brazilian and UK universities. It reflects on a wide array of evidence collected from the study in Latin America conducted by British Council in 2022/23 and secondary data from published reports and academic research. The guide includes two parts.

The first part is aimed at Brazilian HEIs, and the recommendations relate to intra-institutional factors/dimensions. The second part is focused on policy recommendations directed towards national agencies, policymakers, and international organisations.

## Part A: Practical advice and recommendations for Brazilian HEIs

The recommendations in this part aim to improve the broader readiness of Brazilian universities to engage in international partnerships. Additionally, there are focused recommendations aimed at promoting the engagement of Brazilian and UK HEIs.

Due to the complex regulatory and policy framework in Brazil, Brazilian HEIs experience a high administrative burden in establishing and managing international partnerships. This acts as a key obstacle to the engagement with UK, and other foreign, HEIs and it is not something that can be tackled by Brazilian HEIs alone. Hence, the recommendations in this part can be effective only if the policy/regulatory action points, which are outlined in part B, are also addressed.

### Existing collaboration landscape and barriers to international partnerships

Despite the large number of universities in the country, currently there is very limited teaching and programme delivery international collaboration activity with the

UK, but also more broadly with other countries. The low internationalisation of Brazilian universities can limit their global recognition, restricting research collaborations and cultural exchange opportunities. This lack of international exposure may hinder students' preparedness for the global market and the universities' ability to attract international funding. Ultimately, this could impact the universities' diversity, the quality of their research, and their overall competitiveness in the global educational landscape. However, the specific implications can vary, based on various factors including the universities' inherent characteristics, national policies, and the global higher education context.

Based on the research evidence, the most common institutional-level causes of the reduced international collaboration activity in Brazil are:

- Lack of a focused and well-defined university internationalisation strategy. The interview findings as well as evidence from other research indicate that there is no clear internationalisation vision at Brazilian universities.
- Limited allocation of resources for pursuing, nurturing, and maintaining international activities. The interviews of this research identified that internationalisation activities at Brazilian universities are pursued without the necessary backing up of financial and other resources.
- Academic staff and student language barriers. The proficiency in English has been identified<sup>2</sup> as a key barrier for the internationalisation of Brazilian universities.
- Lack of motivation by faculty to pursue and support international activities.
- Concerns about the potential alleviating impact of “North-to-South” type of internationalisation activities. The

<sup>2</sup> Neves, C. E. B., & Barbosa, M. L. de O. (2020). Internationalization of higher education in Brazil: Advances, obstacles, and challenges. *Sociologias*, 22, 144–175.

interviews confirmed evidence from other research<sup>3</sup> about negative perceptions regarding the motive and impact of international partnerships in the local context.

- Regulatory burden for independent TNE projects (e.g., local delivery of a foreign programme). The interviews revealed that the absence of a specific and well-defined regulatory framework for TNE activities leads to ambiguities and inefficiencies during the development and management of such activities.

## Recommendations

### Faculty and student buy-in

One of the most important components for the successful international engagement in higher education is the faculty and student buy-in. To achieve appropriate faculty and student engagement with international collaboration projects, it is important to highlight and present to them the benefits of such activity. Hence the first recommendation for developing successful international partnerships is to justify their value to the student experience, quality of teaching and research outputs, and the global visibility and reputation of universities. To achieve this Brazilian universities could consider international collaboration as endogenous to local provision and as an inseparable element of their teaching model. Some of the key points that can be used to communicate these benefits to key internal stakeholders are:

- International collaborations allow to expose students to different learning environments, assessment designs, and experiential learning opportunities. These elements are highly valued by students who tend to rate international learning experience as of high value to their learning.

- International projects lead to innovation in teaching and enhancement of the curriculum
- International partnerships improve the employability prospects of graduates.
- Such projects generate valuable research collaborations that evidently produce publications of higher quality/impact.

### University internationalisation strategy

A key prerequisite for the development of successful international partnerships is the existence of a well-defined university internationalisation strategy. This is vital for communicating to internal and external stakeholders the university objectives and priorities for international collaboration.

The Brazilian universities should seek to develop an internationalisation strategy with:

- Measurable objectives about: 1) mobility of students and faculty, and 2) collaboration on academic programmes.
- Specific targets to measure the achievement of the strategy objectives.
- Faculty incentives linked to targets in their annual appraisal schemes. Academic and administrative staff should be given an incentive to engage with international collaboration activity via their annual appraisal targets. For example, evaluation and promotion criteria could include recognition for the staff contribution to the development, management, teaching or research related to international collaboration projects.
- Appropriate resources allocated to each of the strategic objectives. Developing and managing international collaboration requires substantial resources. Hence there needs to be a resource allocation plan for each of the targets of the university internationalisation strategy. These resources refer to administrative and academic staff time, travel and subsistence expenditure, learning

<sup>3</sup> Guilherme, A., Morosini, M., & Kohls dos Santos, P. (2018). The process of internationalisation of higher education in Brazil: The impact of colonisation on south-south relations. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 16(4), 409–421.

resources (both physical and digital), contingency arrangements. The allocation of these resources it will depend upon the type and broader characteristics of international partnership.

- Consider expanding on what constitutes appropriate resources, such as financial support, staff allocation, infrastructure development, or partnership funding. Providing specific examples or guidelines for resource allocation can enhance the practicality and applicability of the recommendation.

### **Implement and cascade the strategy by example**

Implementing an internationalisation strategy is a challenging task and this is where most universities encounter challenges. These challenges relate to departments and schools not being able to translate the university-wide internationalisation strategy into specific local actions. Due to the broad nature of strategic objectives, local stakeholders (e.g., managers and academics in departments and schools) are not always clear as to how these could be aligned with the core activities of teaching and research. One practical solution to this problem is to start by focusing on establishing one exemplar collaboration that can be used as the blueprint across the organisation.

- Brazilian Universities can start from a faculty/school that is best positioned to establish an international partnership with UK universities. Then they can replicate/expand the collaboration model to other faculties/programmes. This approach is widely used as a way to provide a concrete example as to how internationalisation success looks like. Also, it allows the university to set and maintain certain standards about the type of activities that may emerge from the internationalisation strategy.

Additionally, for the successful implementation of the internationalisation strategy, it is important for Brazilian universities to cascade the information at each department. This is best served by identifying academics who have a genuine interest in internationalisation and can act as points of contact and support.

- Identify faculty members with expertise and interest in international collaboration who will act as “internationalisation champions”. Under this role, internationalisation champions could organise information sessions about the objectives of the university internationalisation strategy and how these could be achieved at local level. Also, they could act as the first point of contact and advice when it comes to ideas and initial proposals for international collaboration projects.

### **Language capacity**

Most of international collaboration projects require a good level of proficiency in English by all key internal stakeholders (e.g., academics, students, administrators). In the Brazilian context, the English language element of international collaboration is often seen as a source of inequality and alienation<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, Brazilian universities have a strong international engagement with non-English speaking countries that can provide unique opportunities for multi-country collaboration projects. To develop their language readiness and capacity Brazilian universities could adopt the following:

- Create foreign language support for students and staff. This could extend beyond English to include other foreign languages that can boost international collaboration with a broader range of other countries. Some practical examples of this type of language support can include elective language modules, language virtual exchange

<sup>4</sup> Martínez, R. (2016). English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Brazilian higher education: Challenges and opportunities. *English in Brazil: Views, Policies and Programs*, 191–228.

programmes, and language learning resources.

- Portuguese language support for foreign students and staff. This will accelerate the integration to the local context leading to an improved overall experience of foreign students and staff. Also, this can promote the development of more equitable forms of collaboration and help improve the inbound mobility flow in double/exchange programmes.

## Part B: Policy-level recommendations

Brazil has an active HE internationalisation policy framework but with substantial gaps, especially in transnational education. A robust and clear regulatory and broader policy framework is a prerequisite for any TNE activity. Such a framework provides the parameters within which Brazilian and foreign universities design and implement collaboration projects. The existing policy framework for international collaboration is lacking clarity and detail. For example there are no specific requirements, guidelines and prerequisites for establishing TNE projects. This accounts for all types of TNE (e.g., Branch campus, double degrees, and collaborative provision) which is something that creates substantial obstacles to the internationalisation of the Brazilian HE sector.

Also, the lack of a well-articulated and easily accessible framework does not help foreign universities interested in pursuing collaborative projects in Brazil. For example foreign universities considering to embark on an international partnership with Brazilian universities would look to minimise the regulatory and operational risk. The absence of a clear regulatory framework increases that risk.

There is a relatively complex system of quality evaluation and external quality assurance that acts as a barrier to international collaboration (Tsiligiris and

Bessa-Rodrigues 2022). This acts as a barrier because it creates operational uncertainty and administrative burden for the collaborating institutions. Additionally, the lack of a clear framework for the recognition of foreign academic qualifications, and particularly the absence of an operational Mutual Recognition of Qualifications (MRQ) between the UK and Brazil, hinders the development of TNE projects. More specifically, the lack of recognition can deter students from participating in TNE programmes, thus reducing the potential size of the market. Furthermore the employability of graduates could be impacted if qualifications are not recognised, hence discouraging further universities to develop such programmes. Finally, policy and funding decisions could be negatively impacted, with governments and funding bodies less likely to support collaborations with universities where qualifications are unrecognised. This could result in less funding for joint projects or initiatives. Mutual recognition agreements can help alleviate these issues, ensuring qualifications are recognised across borders to facilitate greater international collaboration.

Another important macro-level challenge is the insufficient funding to the Brazilian HEIs which affects their readiness to internationalise. Related to financing is the fact that Brazilian HEIs do not charge fees whereas UK and other foreign HEIs do charge fees. This creates a financial imbalance in any potential international collaboration project.

## Recommendations

### An enabling policy framework for international collaboration in higher education

As it has been outlined in Figure 1 above, an enabling policy framework is a key prerequisite for the development of sustainable international partnerships. The



existence of a clear and well communicated regulatory framework provides clarity to local and foreign universities about the requirements of the international partnerships. This is important in reducing the operational and regulatory risk for foreign universities who are looking for detailed and clear regulatory criteria when embarking on an international partnership. Brazilian authorities and policymakers should aim to shape an enabling policy framework with the following characteristics:

1. It is clear and concise in defining the approval requirements for each of the key types of international mobility and collaboration in higher education. In this context, Brazilian policymakers need to consider developing a policy framework about key types of transnational education: 1) collaborative provision (e.g., validation, franchising, double/dual/joint degrees), 2) campuses of foreign universities, and 3) online/distance learning provision.
2. It is easily accessible through a dedicated online portal to local stakeholders (e.g., Brazilian university staff), foreign universities and other external stakeholders. Brazilian universities need to be provided with a clear and concise overview of the regulatory context of these main forms of international collaboration. For example, there is the need to outline 1) what is allowed, 2) what are the requirements, and 3) what is the process and timeline for gaining regulatory approval. To enable the access of foreign stakeholders, the policy framework needs to be available in English and other languages that represent the majority of the languages spoken by the partners of the Brazilian HE sector.

Is reflective of the country's policy and the local university priorities for the internationalisation of higher education.

The development of the policy framework should be informed by the Brazilian government's strategic priorities about the internationalisation of the HE sector – for example, it should be reflective of the targets for inbound and outbound mobility of students and academic staff, and the priority areas for skills, innovation and research. Also, the policy framework needs to be developed in consultation with Brazilian HEIs stakeholders to reflect their strategic and operational considerations.

### **Recognition of foreign and TNE qualifications**

Additionally, Brazilian policymakers should focus on shaping an enabling framework for the recognition of foreign qualifications with a clear provision for TNE qualifications. The existing recognition system is based on the autonomy of Brazilian universities, and this should be respected and maintained. However, there needs to be a provision for an automatic recognition process of academic credits for foreign qualifications for certain countries that fulfil certain criteria set by the Brazilian HE sector. This could reflect on the UNESCO's [New Regional Convention for the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean \(NCRALC\)](#)<sup>5</sup> Also, the structure and quality standing of higher education qualifications from European Higher Education Area<sup>6</sup> countries possess similar characteristics that cater for a standardised recognition approach. This will strengthen the readiness of the Brazilian HE sector to establish collaborative projects with universities from the EHEA, including the UK. For example, the automatic recognition of academic credits, benchmarked against the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)<sup>7</sup> can facilitate the development of double degrees and exchange of students.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2023042113191746>

<sup>6</sup> [European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process \(ehea.info\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System \(ECTS\) | European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](#)

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