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Brazil's Transition to Donor in Higher Education and Science: A Distinctive South-South Cooperation Rationale?

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Abstract

International cooperation in higher education (HE) has historically reflected the global geopolitical landscape and its uneven relations, with high-income countries in the Global North channelling aid—primarily through scholarships—to former colonies and strategic partners. While these flows have benefitted individuals and institutions, they have also entrenched epistemic and institutional asymmetries. Recent shifts toward a "multiplex" world have diversified actors, modalities, and rationales in HE aid, with emerging donors such as Brazil challenging traditional paradigms in educational cooperation. This article examines Brazil's transition from aid recipient in HE to regional and global donor actor, analysing seven cooperation programmes targeting Latin America and Africa. Drawing on documentary and statistical sources, it explores the distinctive rationales and approaches underpinning Brazil's model of South-South HE collaboration, grounded in solidarity and public good. In doing so, the article contributes to broader debates on the changing geography of HE internationalisation, the role of emerging powers in educational cooperation, and the possibilities and limitations of alternative development partnerships. At this pivotal geopolitical moment, the article asks whether these emerging practices signify a genuinely alternative model for

international cooperation in HE, or merely a reconfiguration of existing hegemonies in the global HE landscape.

Keywords: South-South cooperation; higher education aid; soft power; internationalisation; emerging donors; Brazil

Introduction

International cooperation in higher education (HE) since the Second World War has largely followed dominant geopolitical dynamics. High-income countries in the Global North have dedicated not insubstantial parts of their aid budgets to support lower-income countries in addressing the challenges of coverage and quality in their HE systems. These flows have focused largely on former colonies or other target countries in their sphere of influence, with mixed rationales of soft power, philanthropy, support for newly independent states, and talent-seeking (Knight, 2022; Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023; Schendel et al., 2024). In 2019, $5.31 billion USD was dedicated to HE aid, of a total of $14.3 billion USD to education, with the vast majority going to scholarships in the donor country. As much as 71% of all HE aid went to these scholarships in 2019, with the largest donors being Germany, France, and Japan (UNESCO IESALC, 2022). There have also been grants and loans from the World Bank and bilateral institutions for developing domestic HE systems, along with collaborative research funds, though with far smaller volumes of investment (Rensimer & McCowan, 2023).

These flows have brought significant economic and personal impacts for the individuals who have benefited from the scholarship programmes, stimulated broader societal benefits (brain drain notwithstanding) through the enhancement of professional skills (Dassin et al., 2017), and enabled the expansion of HE systems through increased numbers of staff with higher degrees. However, the positive impacts have been balanced, if not outweighed, by a solidifying of the Global North's hegemony in education and science. This hegemony is perhaps most apparent through an entrenched asymmetry of control of research agendas and epistemic norms; the continued dominance of knowledge production and distribution; and an increased homogeneity of languages, knowledge traditions, and academic cultures (Collins & Rhoads, 2010; Heleta & Bagus, 2021; McCowan, 2019; Naidoo, 2011).

Nevertheless, these dynamics have been unsettled in recent years through shifts in the geopolitical landscape, and movements towards what Acharya (2017) calls a 'multiplex' world. Changes can be seen in actors, modalities, and rationales of HE aid (Rensimer & McCowan, 2024; Schendel et al., 2024). In terms of the former, regional blocs have become increasingly significant—in particular, the European Union, but also Mercosur in South America and ASEAN in South-East Asia. New bilaterals have also burst onto the aid scene, with the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) prominent, as would be expected, but also a range of other countries with

[1] Rounded to one decimal place.

accumulated state wealth and a desire to extend regional and global influence. Turkey, South Korea, Poland, and Saudi Arabia were all in the top 15 of HE donors across the decade of the 2010s (Schendel et al., 2024).

Modalities of aid have also changed, moving away from the conventional state-to-state or multilateral-agency-to-state flows, reported through the OECD's Creditor Reporting System. A diverse range of flows is now evident, with differing levels of transparency, blurred lines between aid and trade, and increased involvement of private sector players on both sides. Finally, rationales have also shifted and diversified (Schendel et al., 2024), with a movement from the language of 'aid' to that of 'partnership', and the emergence of opposing rationales of South-South or North-South solidarity and more explicit self-interest ('retroliberalism' in Mawdsley et al.'s (2018) terms).

This shifting panorama leaves us with a crucial question: to what extent have these changes in aid flows led to increased democratisation, openness, and heterogeneity of international HE? Alternatively, does the old hegemony simply have a new face? This article will assess these dynamics in relation to the country case of Brazil. As a large, upper-middle income country, as well as the leading power in Latin America, Brazil is a critical case of a country which has transitioned from being a recipient of aid from the Global North in the post-war period, to being a donor and wielder of regional and international influence. While we focus here on Brazil, its transition offers a broader perspective on how emerging powers mobilise HE cooperation as a tool of international cooperation, regional integration, and geopolitical influence. This perspective can, in turn, contribute to broader debates about the changing geography of international HE cooperation. Drawing on documentary sources and statistical evidence from Brazilian national agencies and international organisations, this article analyses a range of international cooperation programmes in HE and science to assess their orientations, processes, and impacts. In particular, it explores the ways in which Brazil might represent a new model of HE cooperation, based on South-South solidarity and public good, rather than economic and geo-political self-interest (Inoue & Vaz, 2012). This prospect of an alternative model prompts broader reflection on whether new forms of educational cooperation can challenge established hierarchies in global knowledge production and development assistance.

With great caution, we use the term 'donor' in the title and throughout this article, as neither the word (donor) nor the action (donate) can be considered neutral or value-free (Benveniste, 1948). Within the discourse of international aid, labelling one country the 'donor' and another the 'recipient' is far from impartial; it linguistically establishes a hierarchy (Smith, 2021). The 'donor' is implicitly portrayed as the dynamic and generous party, possessing surplus resources to give and the authority to set the terms of the donation. Conversely, the 'recipient' is depicted in a passive role, characterised by need and reliance. We recognise that this linguistic framework reinforces existing power imbalances in ways that can obscure the complex historical, economic, and political factors contributing to wealth disparities, and it diminishes the perceived agency and sovereignty of the nation labelled as the 'recipient'.

Following a brief outline of the methodology, the article presents a historical overview of support provided for Brazilian HE by external agencies such as the World Bank and the Ford Foundation. The main part of the article then addresses the

country's transition to donor, assessing seven programmes of support for HE systems of low- and middle-income countries in Latin America and Africa. Finally, implications will be drawn out for the current landscape of international cooperation in HE, and the possibilities of new narratives and practices.

Methodology

This study uses a research design based on documentary and descriptive statistical analysis to investigate Brazil's transition from an aid recipient to a donor in HE and science. The research is grounded in the analysis of official policy documents, institutional reports, and legislative frameworks from key Brazilian agencies—such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE), the Ministry of Education (MEC), and the Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education (CAPES)—alongside data from international organisations like UNESCO and the OECD. As this study relies primarily on macro-level documentary evidence and institutional metrics and information, its scope is limited predominantly to policy design and official discourse. It therefore represents exploratory research, and would need to be supplemented by stakeholder interviews, field perspectives, and primary qualitative data from international students and academic staff in order to represent the lived outcomes of these initiatives.

In this article, we draw upon Milani's (2015) three-dimensional framework for understanding Brazil's educational cooperation:

> (i) Economically, education relates directly to the qualification of labour from one country, and cooperation is a form of relationship that seeks to build capabilities; (ii) Politically, educational cooperation is part of a positive agenda of Brazil's foreign policy, to promote closer relations between States and societies based on principles of solidarity and non-intervention in other developing countries; (iii) Culturally, coexistence, language learning and exchange of experiences contribute to the strengthening of ties between different societies, thus promoting mutual understanding of the realities of other countries. (Milani, 2015, p. 38)

Documentary sources were deductively coded and categorised according to Milani's (2015) three dimensions—political, economic, and cultural—allowing for a systematic assessment across the selected initiatives. This framing, used to analyse the distinct dimensions of partnerships in HE and science, is appropriate for our analysis given its specificity to the Brazilian context and the nuances of South-South Cooperation (SSC). Traditional aid frameworks, often rooted in the OECD-DAC definitions, tend to prioritise a vertical, donor-recipient financial logic that may fail to capture the multidimensionality of horizontal cooperation. Milani's framework allows for a more holistic analysis by categorising Brazil's actions into three interconnected dimensions—economic, political, and cultural. These dimensions serve as the primary analytical lenses through which the initiatives are unpacked.

The seven initiatives analysed in this manuscript were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to represent the diversity and reach of Brazil's international engagement. The criteria for selection were based on:

- Scale and modality: covering bilateral programmes (e.g., PEC-G/PEC-PG), regional integration (Mercosur), and plurilateral coalitions (BRICS).
- Geographic and linguistic priority: focusing on Brazil's primary diplomatic target zones, specifically Latin America (UNILA, Mercosur) and the PALOP countries in Africa (UNILAB, Cape Verde cooperation).
- Temporal and functional relevance: including established historical programmes alongside recent emergency responses (PESA), thereby providing a comprehensive view of the evolution of Brazil's "donor" identity.

The authors acknowledge their positionality as researchers embedded within the Brazilian public HE system (first author) or with a history of close interaction with actors in the Brazilian academic field (second and third authors), a social space directly influenced by the national policies and internationalisation strategies under analysis. This internal perspective provides deep contextual insight into the operational nuances of programmes such as PEC-G, UNILA, and UNILAB. However, it also requires a commitment to critical distance. To mitigate potential bias, the study relies on a documentary-analytical method and utilises Milani's (2015) framework to rigorously contrast the Brazilian state's official 'solidarity' discourse against the pragmatic dimensions of soft power and national interest.

In this manuscript, the terms Global North and Global South are employed not as rigid geographic markers, but as socio-political and historical constructs that reflect evolving trajectories of power and development. The Global North is defined here as the group of high-income countries—including traditional donors such as the UK, USA, France, Germany, Canada, and Belgium, as well as non-Western states like Japan—that have historically shaped the global aid architecture through OECD-DAC guidelines. The Global South, conversely, encompasses a diverse set of nations that share historical experiences of marginalisation or coloniality, but which are increasingly asserting their agency through South-South Cooperation (SSC).

We acknowledge that this divide is increasingly blurred in what Acharya (2017) terms a 'multiplex world'. In this landscape, emerging actors like China, Saudi Arabia and Singapore occupy hybrid positions—hosting world-leading universities and acting as significant donors while often retaining a South-South rhetorical stance.

External support for Brazilian higher education

Throughout the twentieth century and up to the present, an array of international organisations, bilateral government agencies, and philanthropic foundations have been involved with and financially supported Brazil's education sector, with the broad aim of improving educational access, quality and equity, particularly for marginalised populations. Depending on the donor and era, funding variously targeted primary and secondary education, HE, vocational training, teacher development and educational technology. While much of this focus was trained on

basic education from the 1980s onwards, Brazilian HE also received significant funding from foreign donor partners and actively participated in international educational cooperation. Brazil's HE system has consequently been shaped not only by its domestic political dynamics and national development aims, but also its international partners and material support, with the latter playing an important role in expanding and strengthening the HE sector. Each key political phase over this period variously shaped this relationship between Brazilian HE and its external benefactors (Cunha, 2007).

The first phase in this timeline is marked by the so-called Revolution of 1930, after the economic crisis of 1929, in which Brazil began a national-developmentalist model seeking to transform itself from an agrarian-export to import substitution economy, viewing Brazil's dependence on foreign powers as an obstacle to its own development (Fausto, 2012; Marini, 2000). Under the governments of Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945 and 1951-1954), Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961), and João Goulart (1961-1964), key sectors were prioritised to modernise the Brazilian economy, with a view of education as essential to national development (Fausto, 2012). Many flagship universities, research institutes, and new scientific and technological development policies were established during this period with public funding, including the University of São Paulo (USP) in 1934, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in 1937 (restructuring and consolidation), the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) in 1951, the Brazilian Centre for Physical Research (CBPF) in 1949, the Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education (Capes), and the Alberto Luiz Coimbra Institute for Graduate Studies and Research in Engineering (often referred to as Coppe) in 1963.

Educational collaborations with foreign institutions and governments rose from the 1960s, particularly with US-based philanthropic foundations (notably, the Ford Foundation) and nascent state agencies committed to international development and US influence in Latin America, including the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Peace Corps, and the Alliance for Progress (Station & Welna, 2002). The Ford Foundation established its Brazil office in Rio de Janeiro in 1962, with its strategic priorities focused on development, governance, reproductive health, human rights, and education reform (Brooke, 2002). Its initial programming provided grants to cadres of economists, public administrators, scientists, educators, and engineers to learn from American counterparts, circulating Brazilian public servants to the USA and American subject experts to Brazil for advanced training in their fields (Station & Welna, 2002).

CAPES, Brazil's flagship grant-making agency, was established in 1951 to coordinate funding for HE capacity-enhancing initiatives through individual and institutional grants. The US Fulbright Programme engaged with Brazilian academics through CAPES as early as 1957 through the establishment of a bilateral commission to implement Fulbright educational exchanges (Toscano, 2014). CAPES, which along with CNPq was responsible for funding scientific research, partnered closely with Fulbright and the Ford Foundation and received millions of dollars in granted support from the latter in the 1960s to develop institutional capacity and train researchers. Brazilian universities were also commonly direct beneficiaries of the Foundation's grants and received the lion's share (71%) of its support in that decade (Brooke, 2002). These grants, focusing on postgraduate education and research, marked the beginning of significant international involvement in Brazil's HE.

Some of these external partnerships continued under the military dictatorship (1964-1985), including support from the Ford Foundation and USAID, although the modality did shift away from directly funding public agencies and towards supporting non-government organisations from the 1970s. In one notable example, the Ford Foundation in 1969 helped establish and fund the Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP), an influential social science research institute which supported and provided refuge for academics who had left their university posts under pressure from the military junta (Brooke, 2002). Similarly, USAID provided technical and financial support to reform Brazil's HE sector under the University Reform Law 5.540/68, with the supposed intention of modernising Brazilian universities by adopting the American departmental system of university governance (Pelegrini & Azevedo, 2009; Vechia & Gomes Ferreira, 2020). Through CAPES, Brazil established international partnerships with HEIs in the USA via the Fulbright Commission and the Latin American Scholarship Programme of American Universities (LASPAU, established in 1966), and built academic links with France through the French Committee for the Evaluation of University Cooperation (COFECUB, established in 1978). Equivalent partnerships with the UK (British Council in 1988) and Germany (DAAD in 1994) were established in the post-dictatorship period (Toscano, 2014).

From the Sarney government (1985-1990) onwards, Brazil entered its era of economic liberalisation, with a more radical turn under Fernando Collor (1990-1992), adopting neoliberal economic policies that significantly reduced government spending on public services, including HE. While external support continued, Brazil increasingly focused on efficiency and institutional reform, rather than on access or equity. Following the World Bank's prescriptions for structural adjustment, Brazil's spending on public HEIs was severely cut back in order to prioritise spending on basic education, opening spaces for the growth of private HEIs (Kempner & Loureiro, 2002). World Bank support also shifted to subsidised loans, with its loans for Brazil's education sector increasing tenfold between 1987 and 1994 (Soares, 1995, cited in Kempner & Loureiro, 2002, p. 342). The emphasis placed on internationalisation in Brazilian HE under Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) also led to an increase in small-scale partnerships between universities and increased donor support for international mobility to overseas destinations. For example, the European Union's ALFA and AlßAN programmes (introduced in 1994 and 2002, respectively) were designed to facilitate HEI cooperation between Latin American and European universities and support the mobility of students from the former to the latter. Out of the 251 grants to Latin America in 2002, roughly one-quarter went to Brazil, involving 75 Brazilian institutions (Laus & Morosini, 2005).

HE policy under the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) administrations focused heavily on social inclusion, expanding access, and supporting underrepresented groups, such as African-Brazilian and indigenous students. In this period, Brazil began to actively engage in South-South initiatives, such as the BRICS Universities League (established in 2013, initially with participation of nine of Brazil's oldest federal and pontifical research universities) and the BRICS University Network (created in 2015). In 2011, Brazil also established the large-scale international mobility programme Science without Borders (*Ciência sem Fronteiras*), supporting Brazilian undergraduate and graduate students who wished to study in high-prestige

universities overseas. Official development assistance (ODA) to Brazilian HE during the Rousseff years averaged US$70 million per year, although over 90 percent of these sums were for international scholarships and staff training in donor countries, principally Germany, France, and Portugal (OECD, 2024). The piecemeal non-scholarship aid primarily supported bilateral research partnerships in scientific fields (e.g., the UK's Newton Fund and Germany's Academic Exchange Service).

Under Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2023), Brazil's relationship with international educational support became strained. Economic austerity measures and cuts to university funding undermined the HE sector (Azevedo, 2016; Azevedo & Robertson, 2022), while Bolsonaro's administration distanced itself from many international partnerships, shifting toward more authoritarian and neoliberal approaches. Funding from typical Northern partners for international scholarships continued during this period; the limited forms of non-scholarship ODA declined by one-third, however, reflecting a 'retroliberal' trend observed across the BRICS and upper middle-income countries more generally with respect to HE aid (Mawdsley et al., 2018; Rensimer & McCowan, 2023).

With Lula's return to the presidency in 2023, there has been renewed expectation of a more inclusive and globally engaged HE system in Brazil. External collaborations in HE are again receiving attention from policymakers, with a particular focus on cooperation with Global South partners and initiatives, as will be explored further below.

In sum, the growth and development of Brazil's HE sector from the mid-20th century included, and in many ways was shaped by, considerable material and organisational support from external actors. While their influence varied by political and ideological phases across decades, some key donors like the World Bank, the Ford Foundation, and to a lesser degree USAID, retained their involvement throughout. The Ford Foundation was one of the largest patrons to Brazilian HE, especially in the earlier years when higher and technical education were strategically prioritised by donors (Bell, 1971). Out of the total $347 million USD (in 2001 values) granted to Brazil by the Foundation between 1960 and 2001, $104 million USD (30%) went to HE development and scholarships (Brooke, 2002). Across donor partners over this period, the modalities of support gradually shifted towards non-government organisations and individual mobility opportunities, with overall volumes of support declining as aid practices within HE and development discourse evolved globally. During this same time period, Brazil's own international cooperation in education emerged and grew, initially with the support of foreign donors, and later independently of them, charting the country's own agenda and direction for international engagement in HE cooperation.

Brazil as an emerging actor in international HE cooperation

Over the years, and increasingly since the first Lula presidency in 2003, Brazil has positioned itself as a strategic actor in international educational cooperation, shifting its focus toward the Global South (Macedo, 2022). This transition from a passive recipient of HE aid to an agent of internationalisation is driven by policy

initiatives aimed at promoting South-South cooperation. To gauge whether Brazil's approach represents a genuinely alternative, solidarity-based model or a reproduction of existing international practices, we analyse seven key initiatives across Milani's (2015) economic, political, and cultural dimensions, as synthesised below in Table 1:

1. Undergraduate and Postgraduate Student-Agreement Programmes (PEC-G & PEC-PG)
2. The Federal University for Latin American Integration (UNILA)
3. The University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB)
4. Educational MERCOSUR (MARCA & PME)
5. BRICS Academic Cooperation (BRICS-NU & BRICS-UL)
6. Brazil-Cape Verde Bilateral Cooperation
7. The Emergency Academic Solidarity Programme (PESA).

1. Undergraduate and Postgraduate Student-Agreement Programmes (PEC-G & PEC-PG)

Coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE), the PEC-G (1965) and PEC-PG (1981) programmes represent Brazil's pioneering inbound student mobility initiatives and historical pillars of its academic diplomacy (Ferreira de Lima Júnior & Stallivieri, 2023). Legally consolidated by Decree No. 7,948/2013 (Brasil, 2013; 2024), these tuition-free programmes frame internationalisation through an official narrative of interstate solidarity and mutual development with partner countries sharing similar socioeconomic inequalities (Macedo, 2022).

The PEC-G programme supports around 2,000 students per year, with a concentration of participants (nearly 75%) from Lusophone African countries (e.g., Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Principe), as well as Congo and Benin. PEC-PG, on the other hand, has fewer participants (around 700 per year) and is dominated by Latin American & Caribbean students (Colombia, Peru, and Argentina especially) (Paiva et al., 2016). This trend is attributed to Latin America's relatively stronger academic institutions which confer advantages to their PEC-PG applicants in the selection process. The PEC-PG nevertheless provides an affordable pathway for graduates from elsewhere in the region to pursue research degrees which may otherwise be out of reach (Milani, 2015).

However, when scrutinised through Milani's (2015) multi-dimensional framework, these initiatives expose critical structural tensions. From an economic dimension, the absence of tuition fees and the provision of selective financial aid offer a counter-hegemonic alternative to the commodified HE markets of the Global North. This aspect of PEC-G is seen as having a potential contribution to the economic development of poorer partner countries through educational cooperation. The quality and international reputation of Brazilian universities is also a competitive draw for students from economically disadvantaged contexts, particularly for those in fields such as agricultural engineering, civil engineering, and medicine. However, both programmes, to some degree, reproduce material asymmetries and expose participants to hidden socioeconomic vulnerabilities as they rely strictly on unilateral Brazilian budgetary allocations and require students to absorb initial maintenance costs (Macedo, 2022). Nevertheless, Macedo (2022) found positive accounts through field research regarding the financial sustainability of Portuguese-speaking students in Brazil.

Politically, the programmes function as strategic tools for projecting Brazilian soft power across the Global South. This political dimension reveals a shifting ideological agenda, originating during the military national-developmentalist era and later reframed under the 2000s discourse of horizontal cooperation. Furthermore, strict institutional mechanisms mandate that students return to their home countries upon graduation, an explicit policy effort to counter brain drain while tying educational mobility to the development of the partners' states.

The cultural and epistemic dimensions illuminate how structural filters mediate official narratives of solidarity. The geographical distribution of flows demonstrates an uneven landscape: while PEC-G is highly concentrated (nearly 75%) in Lusophone Africa due to linguistic alignments, PEC-PG is predominantly occupied by Latin American students (IPEA, 2017). This trend underscores an epistemic barrier, as competitive postgraduate selection criteria inherently advantage candidates from nations with stronger, pre-existing institutional capacity, implicitly reproducing regional hierarchies within the Global South itself.

2. Federal University of Latin American Integration (UNILA)

Established by Law No. 12,189/2010 (Brasil, 2010a), UNILA represents a highly symbolic milestone in Brazil's regional academic diplomacy, explicitly tasked with fostering Latin American integration and regional development, particularly within MERCOSUR. Geographically anchored in Foz do Iguaçu—on the triple border between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay—and physically located within space granted by the binational Itaipu dam company, the university was designed to overcome geographic and linguistic boundaries, generating "knowledge for a Latin America without borders" (Dias, 2020, p. 14). A proportion of 38% of the students comes from other Latin American countries, making UNILA Brazil's most international university (UNILA, 2025). Courses are provided in both Spanish and Portuguese, and the university focuses on pan-Latin American issues through its educational programmes, research, and community engagement.

Viewed through Milani's (2015) tripartite framework, UNILA reveals deep-seated structural contradictions. From an economic dimension, while the university offers tuition-free education funded entirely by the Brazilian federal government—effectively evading Northern commercialised internationalisation models—it establishes a precarious material asymmetry. This total reliance on a single national budget subjects a project aimed at supranational regionalism to the domestic political and fiscal volatilities of the Brazilian state. This asymmetry applies not only to UNILA but to all public higher education institutions (HEIs) in Brazil, especially following the approval of the New Fiscal Regime via Constitutional Amendment No. 95/2016. This amendment jeopardised achievements, and even the goals, established by the National Education Plan (PNE), including the expansion and democratization of HE (Azevedo, 2016; Amaral, 2016; Canziani, 2018; Paiva et al., 2016).

Politically, UNILA's border-spanning location serves as a deliberate projection of Brazilian soft power and geopolitical alignment, positioning the state as a pivot for South-South solidarity and regional leadership. Culturally and epistemically, although its institutionalised bilingualism (Portuguese/Spanish) seeks to foster a decolonial Latin American consciousness, UNILA continuously grapples with structural hurdles, such as

the operational hegemony of the Portuguese language, the invisibility of indigenous languages, and persistent pressures to conform to Eurocentric academic metrics that often marginalise localised knowledge production.

3. University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB)

Created by Law No. 12,289/2010 (Brasil, 2010b) with its headquarters in Redenção (the first Brazilian municipality to abolish slavery) in Ceará state, UNILAB is a federal HEI structurally designed around international cooperation, affirmative action, and solidarity-based exchange within the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). Specifically targeting Portuguese-speaking African nations, the institution strategically aims to compose up to half of its student body from partner African states while implementing institutional frameworks to prevent brain drain. These frameworks ensure that international students return to their home countries upon graduation to facilitate their integration into labour markets and academic institutions (Meneghel et al., 2017).

From a critical economic perspective, the university relies entirely on financial allocations from the Brazilian federal budget to subsidise infrastructure and student retention. This structural configuration leaves international students exposed to domestic fiscal shocks within Brazil, undermining the narrative of symmetrical economic cooperation between equal partners. This asymmetry is exemplified by the suspension of student assistance for international candidates accepted for the 2025 academic year (UNILAB, 2025).

Politically, UNILAB's highly symbolic geographical placement projects soft power as a form of historical debt restitution, aligning academic diplomacy with Brazil's broader geopolitical focus on Africa. Yet, from a cultural and epistemic dimension, the use of 'Lusophony' as the primary vehicle for integration introduces a critical tension. By centring the Portuguese language, the academic framework risks marginalising the complex, multilingual realities of its African partners, potentially reproducing Eurocentric epistemological structures and institutional dependencies under the guise of South-South solidarity.

4. Educational Mercosur

Inaugurated by the Treaty of Asunción (1991), Mercosur transitioned from a strictly economic customs union toward an integrated educational space managed by the Educational Mercosur Sectoral Commission (CSE). This sub-regional integration framework relies on structural mechanisms such as the Mercosur Student Exchange Programme (PME) and the Programme of Regional Academic Mobility in Accredited Courses (MARCA). Since 2006, MARCA alone has facilitated the mobility of close to 2,000 undergraduate students across 141 accredited HEIs (Azevedo, 2014; MARCA, 2018; MEC, 2024), aiming to harmonise educational systems through credit transfer and mutual qualification recognition.

However, an interpretation of Educational Mercosur through Milani's (2015) critical lens exposes distinct intra-regional friction. From an economic dimension, the bloc operates on a multilateral, decentralised funding structure where each state

absorbs its own mobility costs. While this design avoids unilateral dependence on Brazil, it leaves the programmes highly vulnerable to regional macroeconomic instability; domestic budget cuts and fiscal crises in smaller or unstable economies directly cap student participation and worsen infrastructure disparities.

Politically, the CSE functions as a highly institutionalised platform for sub-regional diplomacy and geopolitical bloc-building. This political dimension forces a constant negotiation between the foreign policy agendas of regional giants like Brazil and Argentina and the national sovereignty of smaller members (Barlete, 2019). Epistemically and culturally, Educational Mercosur has sought to foster regional integration through policy harmonisation, academic mobility, and the promotion of cooperation among its Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking member states. However, Educational Mercosur's frequent embrace of a functionalist approach centred on economic competitiveness occasionally clashes with Eurocentric institutional architectures within domestic universities and therefore falls short of fostering a radically transformative, decolonial educational agenda for the Global South.

5. Academic Cooperation in BRICS Countries

Academic engagement within the BRICS coalition operates primarily through two institutional frameworks: the BRICS Universities League [a 2013 consortium of elite, research-intensive institutions] and the BRICS Network University, which fosters academic mobility and joint research (Baldrighi & Zardo, 2025; Khomyakov et al., 2020). In Brazil, this multilateral cooperation was operationalised via CAPES (Call No. 01/2015), which selectively funded top-tier postgraduate programmes across highly strategic, market-oriented thematic fields, including energy, computer science and economics.

When examined through Milani's (2015) framework, however, this cross-regional alliance reveals a pragmatic shift away from grassroots solidarity toward global technocratic utility. From an economic dimension, funding relies on fragmented domestic budgetary allocations rather than a unified supranational fund. This economic architecture targets elite research hubs to boost global competitiveness and tech innovation, echoing a functionalist approach to internationalisation.

Politically, the bloc serves as a high-level diplomatic arena to project cross-regional soft power and challenge Western hegemony in global governance. Yet, this political dimension conceals steep internal power asymmetries, as the overwhelming financial and institutional weight of China and India often dominates the cooperation agenda. Epistemically and culturally, the BRICS framework presents a profound paradox: while advocating textually for a multipolar world order, it actively reinforces global academic hierarchies by chasing prestige metrics defined by the Global North and adopting English as its institutional lingua franca, thereby frequently reproducing Eurocentric epistemic standards within an ostensibly anti-hegemonic alliance.

6. Brazil-Cape Verde Bilateral Cooperation

Bilateral engagement between Brazil and Cape Verde stands as a resilient showcase of South-South cooperation, tracing back to 1975 when Brazil paradoxically became one of the first nations to recognise Cape Verde's independence despite

Brazil's own right-wing military regime (Morais, 2013). This relationship is conceptually anchored in a shared anti-colonial ethos, historically enriched by Paulo Freire's educational missions to the islands in the late 1970s (Varela, 2022). Over the decades, this partnership evolved into a broad technocratic apparatus spanning health, energy, agriculture[2], and extensive HE initiatives, including the hosting of thousands of students via PEC-G/PEC-PG and the *Caminhos Amefricanos* programme (CAPES, 2024).

However, an analysis of this multifaceted engagement through Milani's (2015) framework exposes clear structural contradictions behind the discourse of horizontal solidarity. From an economic dimension, the flow of resources is primarily unidirectional despite a Cape Verdean desire to foster capacity building and local autonomy in order to stimulate internal progress without generating external dependency (Varela, 2022). As the Brazilian state funds and exports technical assistance and infrastructure models, it establishes a donor-recipient dynamic that implicitly risks reproducing dependency patterns common among North-South forms of cooperation.

Politically, this relationship has served as a strategic instrument of Brazilian foreign policy across varying domestic administrations. The political dimension shows that Brazil leverages deep historical ties to project regional leadership in Africa and formalise state agreements, utilising academic diplomacy as a key mechanism of soft power. Culturally and epistemically, while the shared decolonial lineage offers a strong ideological connection, its contemporary application faces severe operational hurdles. As Morais (2013) notes, Brazil's structural contribution to consolidating the University of Cape Verde (Uni-CV) remains incomplete due to an epistemic mismatch: the institution-building models exported by Brazil frequently collide with the Westernised, European Bologna Process framework adopted by Cape Verde, revealing the structural limitations of unmediated Lusophone solidarity (Morais, 2013).

7. Emergency Academic Solidarity Program (PESA): Welcoming Refugees from Crisis-Affected Countries

Launched in 2022 by the Ministry of Education through CAPES's Call No. 30/2022 (CAPES, 2022), the Emergency Academic Solidarity Programme (PESA) represents a recent humanitarian expansion of Brazil's inbound academic mobility. Designed as an institutional response to global geopolitical crises, conflict, and natural disasters, PESA offers targeted scholarships and temporary fellowships within the national postgraduate system. Its primary objective is to provide a safe academic environment for displaced, refugee academics to act as visiting professors, thereby ensuring the continuity of their scientific production while integrating Brazilian HEIs into global scholar-rescue networks.

Through the lens of Milani's (2015) multi-dimensional framework, PESA exposes the structural constraints embedded within crisis-driven state solidarity. Economically, the programme functions as a welfare-oriented, non-market mechanism that rejects the commercialisation of international academic mobility. Yet beyond the general budgetary constraints that affect public policies, PESA operates as a one-off, ad hoc emergency call rather than as a continuous, permanent funding line of the Brazilian state. This

[2] Via Embrapa, the Brazilian state-owned Agricultural Research Corporation (see Embrapa, 2008).

feature highlights how humanitarian intake initiatives often remain bound to executive discretion, depending on the political sensibilities and the commitment to solidarity of the government in office and momentary fiscal availability.

Politically, the initiative acts as a strategic diplomatic asset, projecting a cosmopolitan image of Brazil as a defender of human rights and academic freedom in international forums. Through the intake of refugee academics and the promotion of cross-border scientific collaboration, PESA functions as an instrument of knowledge diplomacy that enhances Brazil's soft-power credentials while simultaneously advancing humanitarian and internationalisation objectives within its HE. Yet, from a cultural and epistemic dimension, PESA's implementation creates distinct operational friction. While it fosters "internationalisation-at-home" by bringing diverse perspectives into Brazilian classrooms, the incoming scholars often collide with a highly bureaucratised and insular academic ecosystem. Rigid structural demands, complex diploma revalidation barriers, and strict language requirements frequently constrain the epistemic agency of non-Lusophone academics, proving that institutional solidarity remains limited by domestic structural parameters.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Brazilian Academic Diplomacy and South-South Cooperation Across Milani's (2015) Dimensions

Initiative / Programme	Economic Dimension	Political Dimension	Cultural Dimension
1. PEC-G & PEC-PG	Unilateral funding through tuition-free education and stipends from the Brazilian State, attracting Global South students due to lower costs compared to the Global North. However, it perpetuates material asymmetries: reliance on fluctuating domestic budgets and initial financial requirements introduce socioeconomic vulnerabilities for students.	Historical instruments of academic diplomacy and soft power projection by the Brazilian State. These programmes reflect a transition of agendas established during the military national-developmentalist era (1960s/1980s) and later reframed under the rhetoric of "solidarity-based cooperation" in the 2000s. Focus on preventing brain drain through mandatory return policies.	Promotion of integration via the dissemination of the Portuguese language and cultural exchange. Nevertheless, the uneven geographical distribution (PEC-G concentrated in Lusophone Africa; PEC-PG dominated by Latin America due to disparities in prior academic training) reveals linguistic barriers and epistemic asymmetries in competitive postgraduate selection.
2. UNILA	Unilateral funding by the Brazilian federal government, utilising physical infrastructure granted by the binational entity Itaipu. While it avoids market-driven tuition models, its financial sustainability remains vulnerable to Brazil's domestic economic shifts, establishing a material dependence that contradicts the horizontal rhetoric of regional integration.	A strategic tool of Brazilian foreign policy and academic diplomacy aimed at fostering regional leadership and Latin American/Mercosur integration. Located at a geopolitical border hotspot (Brazil-Argentina-Paraguay), it projects state-backed regionalism through institutionalised South-South solidarity.	Designed as a bilingual (Portuguese/Spanish) and intercultural space to promote a borderless, decolonial Latin American identity. However, it faces operational tensions in balancing regional epistemic traditions against global, Eurocentric academic metrics and language-dominance hierarchies.
3.UNILAB	Funded entirely by the Brazilian state budget to cover international student costs and ensure retention. This unilateral dependency exposes African partners to changes in Brazil's internal economic policies, undermining the narrative of symmetrical economic cooperation between nations.	Actively aligns academic diplomacy with Brazil's strategic geopolitical focus on Africa and the CPLP. Established in a highly symbolic location (*Redenção*, the first town to abolish slavery in Brazil), it projects a narrative of historical debt restitution, managed via strict anti-brain-drain policies.	Promotes Afro-Brazilian and Lusophone integration, using Portuguese as a unifying tool for South-South solidarity. However, it creates epistemic tensions by centring a single colonial language within diverse African linguistic landscapes, risking the reproduction of Eurocentric academic structures.
4. Educational Mercosur (MARCA & PME)	Operating under a multilateral funding structure where each member nation covers its own mobility costs. While this avoids direct unilateral dependence on	Represents an institutionalised platform for sub-regional integration and geopolitical alignment in South America. It shifts away from pure state-to-state academic diplomacy toward a bureaucratic,	Focuses on structural harmonisation, mutual recognition of degrees, and bilingualism (Portuguese/Spanish). However, it faces resistance from deeply rooted, Eurocentric

	Brazil, it reflects deep intra-regional asymmetries: economic crises and budgetary constraints in smaller or unstable economies directly limit student participation and infrastructure cohesion.	regional framework (via the CSE), balancing national sovereignty against the collective goal of regional bloc-building.	institutional architectures within domestic HEIs and tends to prioritise technical-functional regional skills over a radical decolonial educational agenda.
5. BRICS Academic Cooperation (BRICS-NU & BRICS-UL)	Funded through fragmented national budgetary allocations (such as CAPES in Brazil) rather than a unified pool. The economic agenda is highly functionalist, explicitly targeting strategic techno-scientific sectors (Energy, Computer Science, Economics) to enhance global market competitiveness rather than fostering grassroots educational solidarity.	Serves as a high-level geopolitical alignment platform for cross-regional soft power projection. It exhibits steep internal power asymmetries, with China and India exerting dominant institutional and financial influence. These influences challenge the narrative of horizontal South-South diplomatic reciprocity.	Operates on a paradox: while textually advocating for a multipolar global order, it relies on elite research universities and global ranking frameworks. Furthermore, it adopts English as its institutional lingua franca, potentially reproducing Eurocentric epistemic standards within an ostensibly anti-hegemonic alliance.
6. Brazil-Cape Verde Bilateral Cooperation	Characterised by a donor-recipient dynamic disguised as mutualism, where the Brazilian state (via the Brazilian Cooperation Agency, CAPES, and Embrapa) funds technology transfer, healthcare programmes, and capacity building. This unidirectional flow of resources reinforces Cape Verde's structural dependency on foreign aid, despite local institutional desires for autonomy.	Represents a core pillar of Brazil's soft power and horizontal alignment within the Global South, spanning from the military dictatorship's early pragmatic recognition of independence (1975) to modern efforts. It utilises shared historical ties to formalise bilateral state agreements and project regional leadership in Africa.	Rooted in a shared anti-colonial ethos (influenced by Amílcar Cabral and Paulo Freire) and modern initiatives like *Caminhos Amefricanos*. However, a stark epistemic mismatch arises as Brazil's educational framework clashes with the Europeanised Bologna model adopted by the University of Cape Verde.
7. PESA (Academic Solidarity)	Welfare-oriented, non-market mechanism that rejects academic commercialisation. Rather than a permanent state policy, PESA operates as a one-off, ad hoc emergency call, leaving humanitarian initiatives vulnerable to executive discretion, political will and momentary fiscal availability.	Functions as a recent tool of humanitarian academic diplomacy, aligning Brazil with global scholar-rescue networks. It projects a cosmopolitan image of the state as a defender of human rights and academic freedom, using solidarity as a strategic asset in international forums.	Fosters internationalisation-at-home by integrating displaced scholars into Brazilian HEIs. However, it creates epistemic and operational barriers, as the rigid, highly bureaucratised domestic university system and strict language requirements often hinder the seamless professional integration of non-Lusophone academics.

Conclusions

The seven initiatives outlined above provide evidence of the extensive range of HE collaborations Brazil has engaged in over recent years. The country has emerged as a prominent player in the global landscape of HE and scientific research, leveraging its growing economic and political influence to foster international collaboration. As part of its strategic vision for South-South Cooperation, Brazil has actively engaged in initiatives aimed at enhancing educational and scientific capacities in the Global South. This paper has explored Brazil's role as a donor in HE and science, examining the motivations behind its public efforts and the impact of its contributions on partner countries.

Brazil's engagement as a donor in HE and scientific research highlights its commitment to fostering South-South cooperation and addressing global educational inequalities. Through initiatives like PEC-G and PEC-PG, the establishment of integrative institutions such as UNILA and UNILAB, and its partnerships within frameworks like Mercosur and BRICS, Brazil has not only extended opportunities for international collaboration but also reinforced its role as a bridge between the Global South and North. These efforts reflect a multidimensional approach, balancing solidarity, mutual development, and academic diplomacy. Despite challenges, such as resource constraints and the complexities of aligning diverse educational frameworks (as suggested by the documentary evidence and scholarship figures analysed), Brazil's initiatives are presented as offering tangible benefits through knowledge exchange, capacity building and strengthened cultural ties.

As Milani and others observe, these rationales are embedded within a symbolic regime of cooperation within the Global South in which mutual benefit, rejection of hierarchy and conditionality, and shared relational antipathy to the Global North are key to its posturing as an alternative, reciprocal aid model (Mawdsley, 2012). They are part of a critical turn in the internationalisation of HE that rejects the capitalistic revenue-generating model of the wealthy Anglo-Saxon countries, and the Eurocentrism and epistemic monoculture of mainstream global initiatives, and instead promotes autonomous development of different partners in the context of mutual respect and global social justice (Heleta & Chasi, 2023).

Nevertheless, while notions of solidarity and reciprocity may sustain the public imagination, they belie the underlying economic and geopolitical interests of new donors and the asymmetric power of some Global South 'partners' (i.e. BRICS) over their low-income country beneficiaries. There remains a possibility that state benevolence in Brazil's HE cooperation may be nothing more than a convenient political narrative to rationalise the various economic, scientific, and cultural relations from which Brazil benefits. Inoue and Vaz (2012), for example, question Brazil's solidarity rationale. While the first Lula administration rejected the label of donor, preferring instead 'Southern development partner' in the context of its significant increase in technical assistance programmes, the authors present empirical evidence that national interests were clearly part of the equation, alongside benefits to the recipient countries.

Applying the framework proposed by Milani (2015), we can categorise Brazil's motivations and actions in HE and scientific cooperation across three interconnected dimensions: economic, political, and cultural. Economically, Brazil has focused on training and institutional capacity-building. By sharing expertise (notably through institutions like

Embrapa), Brazil aims to strengthen local expertise in partner countries, framed as a mutual effort to build sustainable local capabilities rather than a traditional donor-recipient relationship. On the other hand, such activities also create fertile ground for future technical partnerships and open markets for Brazilian expertise.

While the international activity of the Brazilian private sector was not the focus of this article, it is important to note the considerable power of large conglomerates in Brazilian HE. The private sector accounts for more than three-quarters of total enrolments in Brazilian HE (INEP, 2025) and, through a process of consolidation in recent decades, is now subject to the control of a few large companies. These companies have shown an increased interest in international markets, such as the Portuguese speaking countries of Africa, particularly through distance education. It remains to be seen whether the trade and aid model of 'retroliberalism' will start to characterise Brazil's approach too.

In relation to the political dimension, there is clear evidence of a balance between foreign policy and solidarity. Educational cooperation serves as a cornerstone of Brazil's South-South foreign policy agenda, promoting closer ties between states based on the principles of solidarity and non-intervention. This 'positive agenda' allows Brazil to exercise soft power while distinguishing itself from Northern aid models, positioning its cooperation as a horizontal partnership among equals in the Global South (Nye Jr, 2009). The country's active involvement in the regional grouping of Mercosur, as well as the BRICS organisations, extend its influence and leadership within Latin America and internationally as a rising 'middle power'.

Finally, there is a strong cultural dimension to Brazil's educational cooperation which focuses primarily on Portuguese language ties and the country's African heritage. Through coexistence and exchange of experiences, the initiatives aim to strengthen the social fabric between societies and facilitate a deeper mutual understanding, especially in the case of PALOP countries, like Cape Verde, with a shared linguistic heritage. The initiatives of UNILA and UNILAB are explicitly designed to challenge what has been documented in the literature as an asymmetrical 'academic gaze'. This dominance of the Global North is distributed through specific mechanisms: the concentration of knowledge production in Anglophone journals (Naidoo, 2011), the prioritisation of Northern-led research agendas in aid-funded projects (McCowan, 2019), and the epistemic norms that often marginalise Global South knowledge traditions (Heleta & Bagus, 2021). By centring Latin American and African perspectives, these Brazilian institutions provide a structural response to these specific forms of academic hegemony. Furthermore, this dimension is intrinsically linked to the internationalisation agenda of Brazilian universities, creating a reciprocal flow of knowledge and culture that enriches the academic environment of all involved parties.

Nevertheless, while the Brazilian government often frames its international engagement through the discourse of 'disinterested solidarity', these initiatives can be interpreted as sophisticated instruments of soft power. By forming international cadres, Brazil builds a symbolic network of alumni who maintain long-term cultural and emotional ties to the country. This projection of influence is not merely an incidental byproduct; it can be considered a strategic effort to accumulate symbolic capital and establish Brazil as a benevolent 'middle power' and regional leader. Critically, this allows Brazil to differentiate itself from Northern donors while securing diplomatic support in international fora, suggesting that the South-South rationale is as much about strategic geopolitical positioning as it is about developmental partnership.

We should caution, however, that while Brazilian policymakers frequently position South-South cooperation as an alternative to Northern aid models, this article has not comparatively examined major HE aid programmes in the Global North, some of which complicate an neat North-South binary. Given the diversity of Northern initiatives, further comparative analysis of international HE cooperation in a global perspective would add nuance to the Brazilian approach and strengthen an argument for its uniqueness.

Brazil's international engagement in HE, we suggest, does not present an entirely disinterested position, free from any concern for national promotion in economic, political, and cultural realms. Nevertheless, the engagements it has are far from being window-dressing, or worse, a smokescreen for predominantly hegemonic interests, as they have been by and large successful in promoting the development of HE in partner countries. This process can be seen clearly in the case of Cape Verde, where dependency on Brazil is avoided through initiatives to develop high-quality domestic provision , for example through the University of Cape Verde. The signs are that this trajectory will continue, with the new national programme of internationalisation of HE (CAPES 2025) having an explicit commitment to South-South solidarity actions (Leal & Moraes 2025).

Although centred on Brazil, our analysis raises broader questions about whether emerging donor actors are producing genuinely alternative models of HE cooperation or adapting established practices to new geopolitical contexts. As such, the Brazilian case highlights some of the continuities and contradictions in South-South cooperation, while also informing new directions for ongoing debates on internationalisation and soft power in global HE partnerships. Ultimately, Brazil's role as a donor in HE and science serves as an example for leveraging international solidarity, promoting inclusivity, and fostering regional and international partnerships. The approach positions Brazil as a key player in shaping a more equitable and interconnected global educational landscape, especially within the scope of academic and scientific cooperation in the Global South.

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