

Post-Pandemic Challenges to the Internationalization of Brazilian Higher Education: A Rapid Review

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Abstract

Internationalization of higher education is recognized as a strategic pillar for strengthening the quality of Brazilian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), although it faces significant challenges. This study aimed to synthesize the scientific literature published in 2024 regarding the challenges faced by Brazilian HEIs in implementing internationalization strategies. Theoretically and methodologically, the research adopted a rapid review framework to ensure a timely synthesis aligned with PRISMA-S guidelines (Garrity et al., 2024; Klerings et al., 2023; Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2023; Tricco et al., 2015). It employed a dual-stage screening process and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to organize and analyze the data, complemented by a critical appraisal of the evidence using the CASP Qualitative Checklist. The corpus consisted of 12 articles, selected according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Thematic analysis enabled the identification and synthesis of the main obstacles to the internationalization process of Brazilian HEIs. The results revealed challenges distributed across internal factors (institutional policies, linguistic barriers, infrastructure), external factors (colonial logics, marketization, global asymmetries), financial limitations, and perceptions of the academic community. This study presents a threefold potential: (i) it promotes critical reflection on the internationalization of Brazilian higher education; (ii) it offers insights for the formulation of institutional and public policies; and (iii) it highlights gaps that can guide future research on the topic.

Keywords: Brazilian higher education, internationalization challenges, rapid review, thematic analysis, PRISMA-S, Global South

1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) has emerged as an important field of inquiry, particularly due to the growth in international academic mobility in recent years (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). Recognizing the value of internationalization for expanding the academic potential of their institutions and for economic growth, many countries have adopted strategies to foster international collaboration, attract international students, and deepen global commitments. As a key player in Latin American higher education, Brazil has also adhered to the internationalization of higher education. Internationalization is understood as a multidimensional institutional process that integrates policies, programs, and practices across teaching, research, and service, rather than a single initiative or mobility program (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2020).

Financial support provided by Brazil's Ministry of Education demonstrates its recognition of the potential benefits of internationalization for the country's higher education (Brasil, 2017). Consider, for example, the objectives of the CAPES-PrInt Program (Note 1):

- II – Stimulate the formation of international research networks with a view to improving the quality of academic production linked to graduate studies;
- III – Expand support actions for internationalization in graduate programs at participating institutions, including cooperative research projects;
- IV – Promote faculty and student mobility, with an emphasis on doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty, from Brazil to other countries and from abroad to Brazil, linked to *stricto sensu* graduate programs;
- V – Foster the transformation of participating institutions into an international environment (Brasil, 2017, p. 20).

It is thus assumed that, through international cooperation agreements and academic mobility, among other strategies, Brazilian HEIs can enhance their academic reputation, contribute to the advancement of knowledge, and position Brazil more prominently on the international stage. However, despite these initiatives, the evidence base on how internationalization is being implemented in Brazil – and what hinders it – remains fragmented and heterogeneous across institutions and regions. Given this uneven landscape, a timely synthesis of the most current evidence is necessary to inform policy and practice in this context.

This study therefore adopts a rapid review framework, which is designed to accelerate the knowledge synthesis process, particularly when a snapshot of the current state of evidence is required (Garrity et al., 2024; Klerings et al., 2023; Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2023; Tricco et al., 2015). Accordingly, this review aimed to synthesize and organize the *current* challenges to the internationalization of Brazilian HEIs by offering an evidence-informed overview to guide policy and practice. We addressed four review questions (RQs):

- RQ1. What internal institutional factors hinder internationalization in Brazilian HEIs?
- RQ2. What external barriers are reported to affect internationalization in Brazilian

HEIs?

RQ3. In what ways do financial constraints influence internationalization processes and participation?

RQ4. How do different stakeholders (students, faculty, staff/administrators) perceive these challenges?

Eligibility was framed using a PCC specification (Population – Concept – Context): Population = Brazilian HEIs and their academic communities (students, faculty, staff); Concept = challenges to internationalization; Context = Brazil (national higher education system). The analysis was focused on articles published in 2024. This specific temporal boundary was chosen to capture the most current state of the literature and to reflect the post-pandemic dynamics shaping academic and international mobility.

Reflexive thematic analysis identified four main themes corresponding to the specific objectives (1)-(4), namely: a) The main internal factors that hinder the internationalization of Brazilian HEIs. b) The external barriers that Brazilian HEIs face in the internationalization process. c) How financial constraints affect internationalization in HEIs. d) The perceptions of students, faculty, and staff regarding the challenges of internationalization in Brazilian HEIs.

2. Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative secondary research design, grounded in a rapid review of the literature, with analysis guided by reflexive thematic analysis and aligned with PRISMA-S reporting standards for search strategies. This methodological approach was chosen to facilitate a timely and efficient synthesis of the most current evidence, as proposed by some researchers (Garrity et al., 2024; Klerings et al., 2023; Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2023; Tricco et al., 2015). No prior protocol was registered for this review.

2.1 Information Sources and Search Strategy

Regarding eligibility parameters, the review encompassed only academic articles addressing the challenges of internationalization in Brazilian HEIs published during 2024. This deliberately restricted temporal scope was designed to capture the most up-to-date body of knowledge and to reflect the post-pandemic landscape of academic and international mobility resumption. Consequently, the national context of Brazil and the 2024 publication year were established as inclusion boundaries, whereas studies lying outside these thematic or temporal delimitations were excluded.

The selection of information sources was driven by the need to capture the specificities of the Brazilian context, which is often structurally underrepresented in Global North-centric databases like Web of Science and Scopus. Research indicates that these commercial indexes may exclude substantial portions of social science literature from the Global South (Rafols, Ciarli, & Chavarro, 2015; Tennant et al., 2019). Therefore, SciELO was prioritized for its comprehensive coverage of Latin American scientific output and native support for multilingualism (Packer, 2009), while the CAPES Portal was utilized for its exhaustive

aggregation of national graduate research, ensuring the inclusion of high-quality domestic scholarship. Finally, Google Scholar was employed as a supplementary tool to maximize sensitivity to *grey literature* and non-indexed policy debates, capturing the diverse formats in which educational challenges are debated in Brazil but often omitted by traditional indexes.

To ensure reproducibility, a systematic search strategy was developed using Boolean logic (Klerings et al., 2023; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). Table 1 details the specific syntax employed for each platform.

Table 1. Search Strategy and Boolean Syntax

Database	Search Terms and Syntax	Justification
SciELO	(internationalization OR “academic mobility” OR “international cooperation”) AND (“higher education” OR university OR HEI) AND (Brazil OR Brazilian)	Focus: Captures Latin American regional literature. Filters: Year: 2024; Language: Portuguese, English.
CAPES Portal	(“internacionalização” OR “cooperação internacional”) AND (“ensino superior” OR “IES”) AND (desafios OR barreiras)	Focus: Aggregates national graduate research and policy analysis. Filters: Year: 2024; Type: Article.
Google Scholar	allintitle: (internacionalização OR internationalization) (Brasil OR Brazil) (“ensino superior” OR “higher education”)	Focus: Maximizes sensitivity for “grey literature” and non-indexed policy papers. Filters: Range: 2024-2024.

2.2 Screening and Selection

The selection of sources of evidence followed a structured two-stage screening procedure. In the initial screening, titles and abstracts were examined according to the predetermined inclusion criteria. This stage was conducted by the primary reviewer, with a 20% sample cross-checked by a second reviewer to ensure consistency. Key bibliographic information – article title, source database, access link, and selection status – was systematically logged in a tracking spreadsheet. The subsequent screening phase involved a full-text review of the preselected studies to confirm their alignment with the review objectives. Studies focusing solely on success stories without addressing challenges were excluded at this stage. Only those texts categorized as accepted after complete reading were retained, yielding a final corpus of 12 articles. All procedures were carefully documented to ensure auditability and reproducibility of the selection process.

2.3 Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Following selection, data extraction was operationalized through an analytical matrix comprising the selected excerpt, assigned code, corresponding theme, thematic axis, bibliographic reference, and additional remarks. This systematic structure enabled a direct correspondence between empirical findings and the review’s analytical dimensions, thereby reinforcing internal consistency.

To address the need for analytical robustness, a modified critical appraisal was conducted using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2021). This appraisal focused on the clarity of research aims, the appropriateness of the methodology, and the transparency of data analysis. A binary assessment (Met/Not Met/Unclear) was applied to these core domains to gauge the trustworthiness of the evidence included.

2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis and synthesis phases were guided by the reflexive thematic analysis model of Braun and Clarke (2022). The process unfolded through six interrelated phases: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme construction, (4) theme refinement, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) production of the analytical report. The analysis moved beyond a semantic reading of the data to a latent analysis, identifying the underlying assumptions and institutional fragilities shaping the discourse. The resulting thematic categories corresponded directly to the four analytical axes delineated in the study's specific objectives.

3. Results

Findings are organized into four themes aligned with the study's specific objectives. First, however, we report the results of the quality assessment.

3.1 Quality Assessment Results

The critical appraisal revealed that while all selected studies provided rich contextual descriptions of the challenges facing Brazilian HEIs, methodological reporting varied. The majority of studies ($n=9$) clearly articulated their research aims and the relevance of the Brazilian context. However, specific details regarding data analysis protocols (e.g., coding frameworks) were frequently implicit or absent in policy-focused articles. This limitation suggests that while the findings offer strong ecological validity regarding institutional experiences, they should be interpreted as exploratory rather than confirmatory evidence.

3.2 Internal Factors that Hinder the Internationalization of Brazilian HEIs

Across the corpus, internal constraints emerged as the most salient impediments to internationalization. A first, cross-cutting issue is the absence of consolidated, institution-wide policies that integrate internationalization with pedagogical projects and routine academic practice. Although the University of São Paulo implements multiple internationalization initiatives, the lack of integrated planning undermines their sustainability (Almeida, 2024). A similar pattern appears at the State University of Feira de Santana, where internationalization advanced in a fragmented manner without a unifying plan, compromising continuity (Brun, Andrade, & Soares, 2024).

Capacity gaps also persist. Linguistic and pedagogical limitations among instructors and students constrain English-medium instruction (EMI), reflecting insufficient training and weak institutional support (Chagas & Guimarães, 2024). In initial teacher education, inadequate preparation and the devaluation of translanguaging approaches hinder the

alignment of future English teachers' practices with internationalization principles (Peruchi, 2024). Machado and Kohls-Santos (2024) also highlight that although MOOCs (Note 2) represent an opportunity to democratize Internationalization at Home (Note 3) (IaH), HEIs still face technical and structural challenges in implementing these tools effectively and accessibly.

IaH remains underdeveloped. Despite broad recognition of its importance, many HEIs lack structured programs and institutional support for internationally oriented courses or materials in additional languages, which narrows participation to a relatively privileged group (Souza & Freire Junior, 2024). Infrastructure deficits compound these problems: poor service provision and low-quality internet make virtual mobility unfeasible in interior institutions, and essential support units – such as language and academic writing centers – are often absent (Chagas & Guimarães, 2024; Teixeira & Soares, 2024). In this vein, the offering of Portuguese for Foreigners at USP is described as a "timid measure," symptomatic of limited support structures and internal resource allocation (Almeida, 2024, p. 165).

Weak cross-unit coordination further diminishes effectiveness. Divergent discourses among academics and administrators about the role of language in internationalization reveal limited institutional alignment on goals and practices, reducing coherence and collective engagement (Martin-Jones, Souza, & Carvalho, 2024). In community HEIs, internationalization is frequently peripheral to pedagogical projects and loosely connected to institutional identity, heightening discontinuity – particularly amid leadership turnover or human-resource shortages (Sonza & Poli, 2024). Taken together, the lack of an embedded institutional culture – alongside reliance on individual champions and fragile regional cooperation networks – undercuts the sustainability of long-term internationalization efforts (Nez, Santos, & Quintana, 2024).

3.3 External Barriers Faced by Brazilian HEIs in the Internationalization Process

External pressures reflect broader geopolitical and market dynamics. A prevailing colonial-neoliberal logic privileges ties with the Global North, positioning Southern institutions as "beneficiaries" and reinforcing Eurocentric models (Almeida, 2024, p. 15). In tandem, the marketization of higher education reframes education as a commodity (Lourenço & Neres, 2024; Almeida, 2024), while international rankings – often built on "wrong criteria" – exert isomorphic pressure that few HEIs can realistically meet (Almeida, 2024, p. 18, citing Marginson, 2014).

Structural asymmetries between North and South remain a principal obstacle to equitable partnerships; internationalization often proceeds under "hegemonic, unilateral logics" that weaken horizontal cooperation (Nez, Santos, & Quintana, 2024, p. 8). National-level constraints amplify these gaps: public policies rarely target IaH, and resources are unevenly distributed, disadvantaging institutions outside the South-Southeast axis (Souza & Freire Junior, 2024).

Language hegemony presents an additional layer. While English is widely treated as necessary for global participation, parts of the academic community – especially in the

humanities and social sciences – perceive the imperative as a form of linguistic subordination (Martin-Jones, Souza, & Carvalho, 2024). In a context where the illusion of monolingualism persists, this emphasis can devalue multilingualism and languages crucial for regional cooperation, such as Spanish (Peruchi, 2024). Legal and administrative frictions further hinder cooperation – notably the “lack of a universal system” for recognizing academic qualifications, which disproportionately affects students from developing countries (Nez, Santos, & Quintana, 2024, p. 9). The weakening of Latin American regional networks limits the growth of robust South-South partnerships.

3.4 How Financial Constraints Affect Internationalization in HEIs

Financial scarcity functions as a structural, cross-cutting constraint. Many HEIs lack sufficient internal funds and depend heavily on external agencies to operationalize internationalization. Even the institutionalization of international relations offices often hinges on state foundation calls (e.g., FAPESB, Note 4), making routine resource seeking a core activity (Brun, Andrade, & Soares, 2024; Teixeira & Soares, 2024). This dependency can reorient agendas toward external priorities (e.g., CAPES-PrInt), creating vulnerability to policy shifts and austerity cycles that disrupt long-term planning (Guimarães, 2024; Martin-Jones, Souza, & Carvalho, 2024, citing Martinez, 2016).

Resource constraints are also exclusionary at the individual level. International mobility typically requires substantial financial support to cover living, travel, and subsistence costs; without institutional backing, participation is often unfeasible (Brun, Andrade, & Soares, 2024, p. 364; Lourenço & Neres, 2024). This dynamic risks “elitizing” access to international experiences (Nez, Santos, & Quintana, 2024, p. 9). Market pressures may intensify these inequities when internationalization is framed as a revenue stream rather than a cooperative academic endeavor (Almeida, 2024). Chronic underfunding also stalls the development of enabling infrastructure: plans for language centers, for instance, frequently face “budgetary problems” (Teixeira & Soares, 2024, p. 14). Faculty report limited support for publications and participation in international venues, curtailing the visibility and circulation of research (Brun, Andrade, & Soares, 2024, p. 371).

3.5 Perceptions of Students, Faculty, and Staff Regarding Internationalization Challenges in Brazilian HEIs

Perceptions vary across institutional roles but converge on several critical pain points. From a management perspective, insufficient engagement beyond the professoriate is a recurring concern; broad participation by administrators and technical staff is seen as essential (Sonza & Poli, 2024). Administrators also cite work overload and staffing shortages – such as the absence of qualified translators – as operational bottlenecks that impede day-to-day internationalization (Martin-Jones, Souza, & Carvalho, 2024). The constant pursuit of external funding and persistent “budgetary problems” reinforce perceptions that financial fragility is endemic (Teixeira & Soares, 2024, p. 156).

Faculty highlight two linked challenges: a perceived individualization of responsibility in the absence of robust institutional policy and limited pedagogical preparation for delivering EMI

– even among those with strong language proficiency (Martin-Jones, Souza, & Carvalho, 2024; Brun, Andrade, & Soares, 2024). Insufficient financial support for publishing and conference participation compounds these concerns (Brun, Andrade, & Soares, 2024).

Students experience constraints most directly. Language remains a primary barrier to mobility opportunities, and the psychological dimension – feelings of inhibition or “a veil of shame” that discourages risk-taking in interaction – can be as limiting as technical competence (Brun, Andrade, & Soares, 2024; Nez, Santos, & Quintana, 2024, p. 13). Cost is a decisive determinant of access; without institutional support, participation is often out of reach (Lourenço & Neres, 2024). At the same time, many students view IaH as a meaningful alternative pathway when mobility is constrained (Souza & Freire Junior, 2024).

4. Discussion: Global Contextualization

The findings of this review underscore that Brazilian HEIs are navigating a complex web of structural, financial, and epistemic challenges. However, these issues are not isolated to the Brazilian context; rather, they reflect broader international debates on the changing nature of higher education in the post-pandemic reality. By interpreting these findings through a global lens, four key dimensions emerge.

4.1 The Resurgence of Borders and the Politics of Mobility

The administrative and visa-related barriers identified in this review (Nez, Santos, & Quintana, 2024) must be situated within the broader “nativist resistance” reshaping global higher education. As noted by Marginson (2024, p. 25), the Western “nativist resistance” has fundamentally altered the geopolitics of mobility. Major destinations in the Global North, including the UK, Canada, and Australia, are implementing increasingly restrictive student visa policies to curb net migration (ICEF Monitor, 2025). The administrative frictions reported by Brazilian scholars are not merely bureaucratic inefficiencies; they reflect a global tightening of borders. This suggests that the *post-pandemic* era may be characterized not by the reopening of borders, but by the consolidation of a stratified mobility regime where access is increasingly determined by geopolitical privilege.

4.2 Financial Precarity and Asymmetrical Models

Financial precarity functions as a structural condition of post-pandemic HE globally, yet its manifestations are asymmetrical. While institutions in the Global North increasingly view internationalization as a revenue stream to offset declining public funding (ICEF Monitor, 2025; Marginson, 2024), Brazilian HEIs view it as a cost center, dependent on fluctuating state agency budgets (e.g., CAPES-PrInt). This divergence underscores the *uneven playing field* described by de Wit and Altbach (2021), where Global South institutions must deplete scarce resources to participate in a global system that extracts financial value from their mobility. The dependency on external agencies reported in this review (Guimarães, 2024) highlights a vulnerability to austerity that is distinct from the market-driven precarity of the North.

4.3 Epistemic Violence and Linguistic Hegemony

The *linguistic subordination* perceived by the Brazilian academic community mirrors global critiques of the *Anglophone hegemony* in science. As highlighted by recent scholarship on epistemic justice, the pressure to publish in English-medium, high-impact journals (often controlled by Global North conglomerates) acts as a gatekeeper, marginalizing epistemologies produced in Portuguese and Spanish (Rafols, Ciarli, & Chavarro, 2015; Tennant et al., 2019). The resistance observed in Brazilian humanities departments (Martin-Jones et al., 2024) is thus a form of *epistemic disobedience*, asserting the value of local relevance over global metrics. This reinforces the argument that international rankings, which prioritize English-language output, often function as forms of global regulation that normalize an Anglo-American hegemony (Marginson, 2014).

4.4 The Myth and Reality of Internationalization at Home

Finally, while IaH and Virtual Exchange are championed globally as inclusive, low-carbon alternatives to physical mobility (Beelen & Jones, 2015), the Brazilian experience reveals the material limits of this discourse. The *infrastructure deficits* and *low-quality internet* identified in this review (Chagas & Guimarães, 2024) align with broader Global South findings that the *digital turn* may inadvertently reinforce exclusion. Without targeted investment in digital capital, IaH risks becoming a stratified privilege rather than a democratizing force, accessible only to well-resourced institutions in the South-Southeast axis of Brazil. This challenges the global narrative that virtual exchange is an inherently equitable solution.

5. Conclusion

This rapid review identified the principal challenges faced by Brazilian HEIs in the internationalization process. Organized into four themes, the thematic analysis of the 12 articles published in 2024 provided a current overview of these challenges. Internally, the absence of consolidated, institution-wide policies; precarious infrastructure; linguistic and pedagogical barriers; underdeveloped IaH strategies; and weak cross-unit coordination emerged as recurring constraints. Externally, the findings illustrate that Brazil serves as a microcosm of broader Global South challenges: navigating colonial and neoliberal logics, the marketization of higher education, and the hegemony of English in a context of limited resources.

Financial constraints function as a structural condition, shaping institutional capacity and patterns of inclusion. Dependence on external funding and exposure to austerity cycles limit continuity, while insufficient support for mobility, language centers, and academic dissemination narrows access and risks elitizing international opportunities. Perceptions across students, faculty, and staff converge on practical bottlenecks: workload and staffing pressures, uneven engagement across campus constituencies, limited preparation for EMI, psychological barriers to participation, and high individual costs.

Overall, this review demonstrates that internationalization in Brazilian HEIs is not merely a technical challenge but a geopolitical one. The obstacles identified – from visa regimes to epistemic violence – require coordinated, system-wide action that moves beyond the

uncritical adoption of Global North models. Institutional and public policies must be recalibrated toward greater equity, inclusion, and contextual fit.

Limitations. This review considered only publications from 2024, which constrains temporal generalizability and may omit trends present in other periods. Furthermore, consistent with the review's goal of providing a timely descriptive synthesis, the critical appraisal was limited to a rapid application of the CASP checklist; accordingly, the synthesis should be viewed as exploratory. These factors should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings.

Implications for future research. The literature gaps – most notably around the funding – internationalization nexus – point to the value of longitudinal and mixed-methods investigations that examine how funding models shape participation, continuity, and equity. Further work could also evaluate interventions that mitigate regional and institutional inequalities (e.g., scalable IaH programs, EMI training models, and multilingual initiatives).

Implications for practice and policy. The findings support the development of coherent institutional policies that integrate internationalization with curricula and student support; targeted investments in enabling infrastructure (language/academic writing centers; reliable connectivity for virtual mobility); capacity-building for EMI and multilingual practices; and equity-oriented funding mechanisms that broaden participation. Such measures can foster a more effective and socially just internationalization landscape across Brazilian HEIs.

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Notes

Note 1. The Institutional Program for Internationalization of CAPES (Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education), which funds strategic internationalization plans, research networks, and mobility of graduate students and faculty between Brazilian institutions and foreign universities.

Note 2. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are used both for non-formal learning and for academic or corporate training.

Note 3. Following Beelen and Jones's (2015, p. 69) definition, Internationalization at Home is the “purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.”

Note 4. Bahia State Research Support Foundation

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