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THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INSTITUTIONAL

A internacionalização das instituições de ensino superior do Rio Grande do Sul na perspectiva dos atores institucionais

La internacionalización de las instituciones de educación superior en Rio Grande do Sul desde la perspectiva de los actores institucionales

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Abstract: The phenomenon of internationalization of higher education is widely recognized as a pressing need in a globalized context. Consequently, numerous countries and institutions have dedicated themselves to establishing internationalization policies, given their strategic relevance in promoting knowledge. This study investigated the

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perspectives of institutional actors in relation to the internationalization process of higher education institutions in Rio Grande do Sul. Using a predominantly quantitative approach, 57 respondents participated in this study, which, in addition to utilizing questionnaires with closed and open questions for data collection, analyzed the content of official strategic documents of the institutions investigated, based on the six axes of the ACE Model of Comprehensive Internationalization. In the Brazilian scenario, the internationalization of higher education still lacks clear guidelines from the public authorities to guide its implementation in institutions. Although institutional actors recognize the importance of internationalization, there is a perception that it is still conducted in isolation by a restricted group of individuals, predominantly associated with postgraduate studies. Several barriers are identified for comprehensive internationalization, including the lack of continuing training programs for teachers, challenges in implementing evaluation processes, the scarcity of internationalized courses in disciplines, and the absence of metrics that allow evaluation of learning outcomes.

Keywords: internationalization; institutional actors; perception analysis.

Resumo: O fenômeno da internacionalização do ensino superior é amplamente reconhecido como uma necessidade premente em um contexto globalizado. Consequentemente, numerosos países e instituições têm se dedicado ao estabelecimento de políticas de internacionalização, dada sua relevância estratégica na promoção do conhecimento. Este estudo investigou a perspectiva dos atores institucionais em relação ao processo de internacionalização das instituições de ensino superior no Rio Grande do Sul. Utilizando uma abordagem predominantemente quantitativa, 57 respondentes participaram do presente estudo que, além de utilizar questionários com questões fechadas e abertas como instrumento de coleta de dados, analisou o conteúdo de documentos estratégicos oficiais das instituições investigadas a partir dos seis eixos do Modelo ACE de internacionalização abrangente. No cenário brasileiro, a internacionalização do ensino superior ainda carece de diretrizes claras por parte do poder público para orientar sua efetivação nas instituições. Embora os atores institucionais reconheçam a importância da internacionalização, há uma percepção de que ela ainda é conduzida de maneira isolada por um grupo restrito de indivíduos, predominantemente associada à pós-graduação. Diversas barreiras são identificadas para uma internacionalização abrangente, incluindo a falta de programas de capacitação continuada para docentes, desafios na implementação de processos de avaliação, a escassez de cursos internacionalizados em disciplinas e a ausência de métricas que permitam a avaliação dos resultados de aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: internacionalização; ensino superior; atores institucionais.

Resumen: El fenómeno de la internacionalización de la educación superior es ampliamente reconocido como una necesidad imperativa en un contexto globalizado. En consecuencia, numerosos países e instituciones han dedicado esfuerzos al establecimiento

de políticas de internacionalización, dada su relevancia estratégica en la promoción del conocimiento. Este estudio investigó la perspectiva de los actores institucionales respecto al proceso de internacionalización en las instituciones de educación superior en Rio Grande do Sul. Adoptando un enfoque predominantemente cuantitativo, participaron en el estudio 57 individuos. Se emplearon cuestionarios con preguntas cerradas y abiertas como instrumentos de recolección de datos, y se analizó el contenido de documentos estratégicos oficiales de las instituciones investigadas, basándose en los seis ejes del Modelo ACE de internacionalización integral. En el contexto brasileño, la internacionalización de la educación superior aún carece de directrices claras por parte de las autoridades públicas que orienten su implementación en las instituciones. Aunque los actores institucionales reconocen la importancia de la internacionalización, se percibe que esta se lleva a cabo de manera aislada por un grupo restringido de individuos, asociándose predominantemente con la posgraduación. Se han identificado diversas barreras para una internacionalización integral, incluyendo la falta de programas de capacitación continua para el cuerpo docente, desafíos en la implementación de procesos de evaluación, la escasez de cursos internacionalizados en las disciplinas y la ausencia de métricas que permitan evaluar los resultados de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: internacionalización; enseñanza superior; actores institucionales.

1 INTRODUCTION

The influence of globalization on local societies and its subsequent implications for higher education are widely recognized in the academic realm, as evidenced by the work of Morosini (2006) and Knight (2020). These authors contend that international education, cooperation, and globalization are critical elements in promoting and developing higher education. Knight (2020) indicates that internationalization has become a central theme in research agendas and institutional policies worldwide, highlighting the growing integration of these concepts in advancing educational progress.

Being positioned in an international environment is essential for the survival and development of higher education institutions. This positioning enables institutions to compete and cooperate equally with other domestic and international entities (Stallivieri, 2002). Additionally, solutions to local issues can sometimes be found through the knowledge produced by the internationalization of educational institutions and their interactions with other institutions or countries (Hudzik, 2011).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an unparalleled global effort among research and educational institutions led to international collaboration to devise effective vaccines against the virus. This cooperation was characterized by the rapid sharing of scientific information and collaborative research projects aimed at expediting the discovery and production of vaccines. For instance, studies such as that by Polack *et al.* (2020) have shown the efficacy of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in preventing COVID-19, while research by Voysey *et al.* (2021) has evaluated the safety and efficacy of the Oxford-

AstraZeneca vaccine. These collaborative efforts among internationally recognized institutions underscore the significance of science during crises and the importance of global cooperation in addressing public health challenges worldwide.

The UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America (Conferência [...], 2003) and the Caribbean (UNESCO; IESALC, 2020) reports that the pandemic has significantly impacted academic mobility in higher education, leading to immediate needs to repatriate students and, longer-term, a decrease in mobility due to financial crises and reduced public funding. Consequently, higher education institutions have been encouraged to devise new internationalization strategies that circumvent the need for physical mobility, thereby innovatively fostering intercultural and international learning, as Toro (2020).

Higher education institutions are pivotal in the post-globalization era, generating knowledge and fostering the integration of cultures and peoples (Stallivieri, 2002). In Brazil, the internationalization of higher education is gaining importance, albeit still nascent, compared to countries in the Northern Hemisphere, such as the United States and France (Neves; Martins, 2016). Knobel *et al.* (2020) note that this internationalization faces considerable challenges, primarily due to reliance on public funding and historical state influence. To succeed, internationalization must be integrated into the strategic decisions of higher education governing bodies (Stallivieri, 2017), perceived as vital by all institutional stakeholders engaged in the social interactions that define the institution (Balbachevsky, 1996). It is, therefore, crucial to examine how initiatives across various domains promote institutional commitment.

Therefore, based on this assumption, this study aimed to explore the perceptions of institutional stakeholders regarding the internationalization process of higher education institutions in Rio Grande do Sul State (southern Brazil).

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Internationalization of higher education

Over the last decade, there has been exponential growth in research related to the internationalization of higher education. However, this trend is not necessarily new. Educational institutions have exhibited traits of internationalization since their inception in the Middle Ages (Stallivieri, 2002), inherently embodying a cosmopolitan nature (Stallivieri, 2017) and navigating tensions between national realities and international trends (Altbach, 2004).

What has transpired in recent years, propelled by globalization (Stallivieri, 2017), is an expansion in the volume, scope, and complexity of universities' international activities (Altbach; Knight, 2007). Globalization has become a significant environmental factor influencing education driving higher education towards more extensive international involvement (Altbach; Knight, 2007).

In the current scenario, where globalization has led to an expansion of international activities in universities and significantly influenced higher education (Altbach; Knight, 2007; Stallivieiri, 2017), the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new vulnerabilities to this phenomenon. As discussed by Cui *et al.* (2023) and Verbeke (2020), these vulnerabilities have exacerbated geopolitical tensions and necessitated a reevaluation of globalization and deglobalization paradigms, affecting business strategies and potentially the future of international higher education.

Being aware of the historical roots of the relationship between universities and internationalization, it has been in recent years, following the advancements of globalization, that internationalization has been analyzed both as a concept and as a strategic factor (Wit, 2002). Given that this is a complex and broad topic, a variety of concepts, theories, models, and approaches have been developed to approach the internationalization of higher education (Carvalho; Araújo, 2020).

Morosini (2006) defines internationalization as a deliberate effort to incorporate an international, intercultural, and global perspective into the goals and functions of post-secondary education. Moreover, it aims to engage global cultures and differences, connect with local communities, and promote global citizenship and sustainable development through cross-border collaborations. The diverse motivations, approaches, and strategies facilitate the development of different theoretical models. One of the primary models is the cyclical model of internationalization proposed by Knight (1997), which portrays internationalization as a continuous and innovative cycle, integrating the international dimension into various institutional processes.

Thus, various strategies, models, and forms are adopted in addressing internationalization in higher education, representing different perspectives that are not mutually exclusive and sometimes complementary. However, the primary focus of strategies has been on student mobility, collaboration, and partnerships (Teodoro; Stallivieiri; Mello, 2019), although it should not be confined to these two areas alone (Gacel-Avila, 2012). It is a process that necessitates formulating and monitoring strategies that proliferate across different institutional contexts (Knight, 2020).

In this context, comprehensive internationalization has emerged as a strategic and holistic response to the challenges and opportunities of the current global scenario, aiming to integrate the various strategies pursued by institutions in an environment where the local and global are interdependent, with the prosperity of one being contingent on the prosperity of the other (Hudzik; McCarthy, 2012). The following section will delve into this holistic approach.

2.1.1 Comprehensive internationalization

Comprehensive internationalization seeks to infuse international, intercultural (Olson; Green; Hill, 2005), global, and comparative dimensions (Hudzik; McCarthy,

2012) into institutions' teaching, research, and extension activities. To this end, in addition to being comprehensive, it aims to be transversal and integrated into all areas of the institution (Teodoro; Stallivieri; Melo, 2019), inducing an institutional strategic change (Olson; Green; Hill, 2006), influencing the *ethos*, values, and institutional culture (Hudzik; McCarthy, 2012).

Comprehensive internationalization does not seek to define a single model but recognizes the multiplicity of approaches (Hudzik, 2011), although some points are essential in the process (Teodoro; Stallivieri, 2019). Educational institutions have different resources, structures, and policies (Hudzik, 2011), which generates variations in the forms and priorities when seeking this internationalization (Hudzik; McCarthy, 2012). However, the diversity of approaches is one of the main criticisms of comprehensive internationalization, as measuring its progress remains challenging for most higher education institutions (Mace; Pearl, 2019).

In order to achieve the objectives sought by comprehensive internationalization, the American Council on Education (ACE, 2020) has developed a model to guide institutions. The internationalization model developed by the ACE identified six main axes in the development of comprehensive internationalization, namely: (i) articulated institutional commitment; (ii) administrative leadership, structure, and personnel; (iii) curriculum, co-curriculum, and learning outcomes; (iv) faculty policies and practices; (v) student mobility; and (vi) collaboration and partnerships.

Teodoro, Stallivieiri and Melo (2019), note that the areas highlighted by the American Council on Education (ACE) require attention and resources to achieve comprehensive internationalization (ACE, 2020) and are essential elements regardless of the approach adopted. The complexity of this internationalization, with its multiplicity of approaches and the lack of a specific model for implementation, as indicated by Hudzik (2011), Hudzik and McCarthy (2012), makes it difficult to measure and evaluate its progress (Mace; Pearl, 2019).

This issue leads to challenges in organizational management, which requires aligning resources and efforts with institutional strategies, as highlighted by Kuipers *et al.* (2014), Von Nordenflycht (2010), Boonstra, Versluis and Vos (2014), Suseno and Pinnington (2017), and Hoover and Harder (2015). Thus, understanding the diversity of forms of internationalization and seeking effective evaluation methods should be part of the broader context of the strategic management of higher education institutions.

2.2 Brazilian higher education and internationalization

Brazilian higher education is characterized by its late development and the co-existence of public and private systems (Durham, 2003). While Spain established its first university in the Americas in 1538, Brazil, colonized by Portugal, lacked higher education institutions during the colonial period, a strategy intended to maintain order (Durham, 2003; Flores, 2017). The internationalization of public higher education in

Brazil can be examined through three approaches: at home, abroad, and at a distance. Although derived from studies in the Global North, these categories facilitate an understanding of the Brazilian process, which is influenced by this context, as evidenced by the internationalization strategy of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, propelled by federal funding (Wagner; Dietrich, 2024).

According to the 2019 Brazilian Higher Education Census, the Brazilian higher education network consists of 2,608 institutions, with 198 (7.6%) being universities, 294 (11.3%) university centers, 2,076 (79.6%) colleges, and 40 (1.5%) IFs and CEFETs. Out of these, 302 (11.6%) are public, and 2,306 (88.4%) are private (INEP, 2021). While universities compose about 8% of all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), they account for 52.2% of all undergraduate enrollments in Brazilian HEIs, with university centers, colleges, and IFs and CEFETs accounting for 26.3%, 19%, and 2.5% of enrollments, respectively.

The discourse on the internationalization of higher education has expanded significantly over the last three decades. Knight (1997) initially perceived it as a response to globalization at the national level. Wit (2002) noted the swift transformation of institutions into global entities, and Crăciun (2018) emphasized the enduring role of nation-states and supranational organizations in shaping internationalization policies, pointing out the interplay between local and global actors. In Brazil, initiatives such as the CAPES-PrInt program aim to strengthen the country's global presence through collaboration with institutions in the Global North, facilitating academic mobility and international partnerships. Despite their significance, these efforts encounter challenges, including financial limitations and dependency on public policies for sustenance (Martin-Jones; Souza; Carvalho, 2024).

In the early 1990s, economic changes and the market's opening to imports highlighted knowledge as a crucial element for national development, propelling the internationalization of educational institutions, both nationally and internationally (Morosini; Corte, 2018). In Brazil, this movement is closely associated with migratory flows (Morosini; Corte, 2018), resulting in a form of passive internationalization with a primary focus on the outward mobility of teachers and students (Carvalho; Araújo, 2020). However, Brazilian mobility rates remain relatively low compared to developed countries (Miranda; Stallivieri, 2017).

In Brazil, three principal government agencies support internationalization efforts in higher education: CAPES, CNPq, and the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC) (Miranda; Stallivieri, 2017; Alves, 2017). The government has concentrated on providing scholarships for studies abroad, such as the PEC-G, PEC-PG, and Sciences Without Borders programs, focusing on academic mobility (Maués; Bastos, 2017). Despite having significant initiatives like these, the country still grapples with challenges, including bureaucracy and the necessity of foreign language proficiency. Nevertheless, CAPES and CNPq are pivotal in fostering international mobility and collaborations (Neves; Barbosa, 2020).

Thus, it is apparent that the evolution of internationalization in Brazil has been shaped by mobility programs, with efforts in recent years to transition from a scenario dominated by passive mobility processes to a strategically active and integrated one. The following section will detail the methodological approach utilized in conducting this research.

3 Methodological procedures

To classify the study according to its central objective, it is defined as descriptive research since it aims to analyze the behavior of a specific population or phenomenon and the relationships between variables (Gil, 2019). The research adopts a quantitative approach, developed through a field survey, to collect information directly from the individuals whose behavior, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and values are to be investigated (Gil, 2019).

In order to conduct studies on internationalization that consider Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within the national territory as the focal point of analysis, it is essential to define the population as comprising all existing HEIs. According to a survey made by the National Register of Higher Education Courses and Institutions of the Ministry of Education in September 2020, there were 3,045 HEIs identified, distributed among universities, university centers, colleges, federal institutes (IFs), and federal technological education centers (CEFETs) (Brasil, 2020).

For the research sample, a non-probabilistic sampling strategy based on accessibility or convenience was utilized. Higher education universities were selected because they account for more than half (52.9%) of Brazil's total enrolment in undergraduate courses (Brasil, 2019). These are institutions engaged in teaching, research, and extension activities, rendering them particularly suitable for fostering the internationalization process. The option to investigate only federal universities in Rio Grande do Sul is due to the availability of institutional documents, as many private institutions do not publicly share their Institutional Development Plans (IDP). Moreover, by selecting public institutions from the same state, we aimed to minimize the impact of external factors and control variables, ensuring similar institutional and environmental conditions.

Rio Grande do Sul State hosts six federal universities: the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEL), the Federal University of Rio Grande (FURG), the Federal University of Pampa (UNIPAMPA), the Federal University of Health Sciences of Porto Alegre (UFCSPA), and the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). These institutions constituted the research sample.

The sample was divided into two groups: Group I, to enable the research based on the analysis of the perceptions of institutional actors from the selected universities. *Those* responsible for the internationalization unit of each institution and *Group II*. Teachers, students, and administrative staff. With regard to Group I, it is important to

note that the internationalization units are given different names according to the organizational structure of each institution, as follows: a) UFSM - International Support Secretariat (SAI); b) UFRGS - International Relations Secretariat (RELINTER); c) UFCSPA - Internationalization Office; d) UFPEL - International Relations Coordination (CRINTER); e) UNIPAMPA - Directorate for Strategic Affairs and Institutional and International Relations (DAEINTER); f) FURG - International Relations Secretariat (REINTER).

Group II included teachers, students, and administrative staff not holding management positions or whose positions were not directly linked to the internationalization process. To represent the stakeholders analyzed, an intentional sample comprised of members of committees responsible for drafting the IDP and the Internationalization Plan (IP) at each institution.

A questionnaire was administered in February 2021 to the two groups (internationalization office heads, teaching staff, students, and administrative staff) to assess their perceptions and behaviors regarding the internationalization process. Drawing from various sources, including Hudzik (2011), Olson, Green and Hill, (2005), the Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses 2016 survey, and models by the ACE (2020) and Knight (1997), the questionnaire was refined following a pre-test and consultations with experts. The final version solicited information on the respondents' profiles, and the status of institutional internationalization and included open-ended questions to complement the results.

Out of a final population of 278 individuals, a 22% response rate was achieved, yielding 57 valid responses. Questionnaires were distributed via email, with contacts sourced from institutional websites, official documents, and other reputable sources. Follow-up attempts were made to improve response rates. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics software, starting with univariate analysis, followed by a bivariate analysis that cross-referenced the central tendency measures of various internationalization dimensions with respondent profile indicators. This comparison aimed to discern differing perceptions of internationalization's key components between the two groups.

4 RESULTS

The results to be presented in this section are segmented into three subsections, organized as follows: 4.1 Profile of the Respondents, 4.2 Overview of Internationalization in the Institutions, and 4.3 The Pillars of Comprehensive Internationalization.

4.1 Profile of the respondents

In order to characterize the profile of the respondents participating in this survey, questions were asked regarding their institution of origin, age, level of education, duration of employment at the institution, primary position held, and participation (or

not) as a member or volunteer in the development of the IDP and/or the Strategic Plan for Internationalization.

The institution with the highest number of respondents was the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), comprising approximately 26% of the sample. It was followed by the Federal University of Rio Grande (FURG) with about 19% of the total sample. Subsequently, UFCSPA accounted for 18%, UFPEL 16%, UNIPAMPA 14%, and UFRGS had the lowest participation, UFRGS with 7%.

The sample was made up of respondents ranging in age from 25 to 68, with an average age of approximately 48. In terms of service duration at their institutions, the majority had been employed for less than 15 years, with a range of 4 to 43 years, resulting in an average of roughly 16 years. This breadth of work experience underpins the study's conclusions. Regarding educational level, most respondents possessed a master's degree (24.6%) or a doctorate (68.4%), accounting for 93% of the sample, indicating a high level of education.

The sample also demonstrated a balance in management roles: 25 respondents held some form of management position, whereas 27 did not. Furthermore, five respondents were responsible for their institutions' internationalization offices, taking on management duties directly related to internationalization, comprising Group I. In Group II, the representation was as follows: approximately 70% of respondents were teaching staff; 22.8% were technical-administrative staff. Only one respondent identified as a student, alongside three individuals who reported being both staff and students.

The diversity within universities, as discussed by Stier (2004), Barnett (2011), and Trondal (2010), is crucial in the implementation of internationalization. This diversity can lead to varied and sometimes conflicting, interpretations of internationalization, stemming from differing ideologies and implicit assumptions. This variety of perspectives can further influence the design and implementation of internationalization policies and practices within the scope of respondents' management roles in higher education institutions. Therefore, analyzing the diverse viewpoints of the respondents enhances understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting effective and meaningful curricular internationalization.

Finally, it can thus be inferred that the survey respondents are highly educated, primarily consisting of faculty members, most of whom have participated in developing their institutions' IDPs.

4.2 Overview of internationalization in institutions

In this stage of the survey, questions were posed regarding respondents' perceptions of internationalization. From this perspective, inquiries were made concerning perceived progress, the primary motivations, prioritized internationalization activities,

and the formal strategic intentions delineated by the institutions in their institutional documents and policies.

Initially, respondents were requested to rate their institution's level of internationalization over the three years preceding the study based on their understanding of the process. As illustrated in Table 1, a majority (57.9%) reported a moderate level of internationalization. An additional 21% described very high and high levels of internationalization, while 21.1% categorized it as very low and low. Among those in managerial positions, 24% reported high and very high levels, 72% moderate, and 4% low. Conversely, among those not in managerial roles, 16% identified very high and high levels, 48% moderate, and 36% very low and low levels of internationalization.

Table 1 - Levels of Internationalization and Management Positions

Category	Very high - High	Moderate	Very low - Low
Total Respondents (57)	12 (21%)	33 (57.9%)	12 (21.1%)
With a Management Position (25)	6 (24%)	18 (72.0%)	1 (4%)
Without a Management Position (27)	4 (16%)	13 (48%)	10 (36%)

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The significant difference in perception between respondents with (4%) and without (36%) management positions, in relation to the levels of internationalization indicated as very low and low, can be explained by the literature, which highlights the role of managers in promoting internationalization as a priority institutional strategy. According to Stallivieri (2017), internationalization must be aligned with the strategic policies of institutions and is often more recognized by managers, who are directly involved in formulating and implementing these policies. These results corroborate the importance of administrative leadership in the perception of progress in the internationalization process, as highlighted by Hudzik (2011), who points out that effective internationalization depends on the strategic commitment of managers and the inclusion of this agenda in policies.

Despite most respondents reporting that their institutions have a moderate level of internationalization, respondents indicate that the process has made progress in recent years. For 86% of the respondents, the internationalization process has advanced in their institutions, of which 31.6% say it has advanced significantly and another 54.4% state that internationalization has advanced, albeit at a slightly slower pace. These findings align with the concept of comprehensive internationalization (Hudzik, 2011), which proposes that the internationalization process is gradual and integrated into all institutional activities, although it can occur at different rates depending on the resources and strategies adopted by each institution.

Another point analyzed as key to the success of internationalization was the institutions' motivations for developing the internationalization process. Motivations should be widely disseminated and known to all. Thus, following the motivations proposed by Hudzik (2011), respondents were asked to identify their institution's main motivations by assigning a scale of importance to each, with 1 being the most important and 6 the least important.

In order to analyze the motivations, a reversal of the scoring scale was proposed. Table 2 shows the final score for each motivation, with a higher weight indicating a greater incidence of importance.

Table 2 - Main motivations for internationalization pointed out by the respondents

	Motivations	Final Score
1 st	Strengthen the structure and added value of a higher education institution in teaching and research in a global higher education system	252
2 nd	Expanding cross-cultural knowledge and understanding, given the greater frequency and need for cross-cultural contacts and relationships (between different cultures)	251
3 rd	Enhance knowledge, skills, attributes, and careers so that graduates and postgraduates are effective citizens and members of the workforce	234
4 th	Improving the workforce and local economic competitiveness in a global market	188
5 th	Attracting international financial resources to the institution	164
6 th	Improving national and global security	108

Source: Prepared by the authors.

According to the results, two primary motivations for internationalization were identified, permeating the institutions' strategic planning. The first motivation is the institution's aspiration for global recognition in teaching and research. This finding aligns with research highlighting the strategic significance of internationalization in enhancing institutional competitiveness within a globalized context. Knight (2020) emphasizes that internationalization has emerged as a critical priority for higher education institutions, facilitating the legitimization of knowledge circulation and the expansion of research networks — key components for achieving global recognition.

The analysis of individual institutions revealed a lack of uniform motivation for internationalization. Although intercultural engagement was the principal motivation for four of the six institutions studied, it was not a consistent trend. Varied perceptions among respondents within each institution suggest potential ambiguities in international ambitions or misalignment of shared institutional goals. This diversity in perspectives is consistent with the complexities of curriculum internationalization, as discussed by Agnew (2013), Clifford (2009), Sanderson (2008), Haigh (2014), and Renfors

(2021). These authors highlight how the beliefs, agendas, and priorities of stakeholders, including academic staff, profoundly influence the internationalization process.

Concurrently, respondents were requested to identify the main internationalization activities undertaken by their institutions in the three years preceding the survey (2018-2020). It is essential that the strategies for internationalization implemented by institutions be extensively communicated, with defined roles for both collectives and individuals to ensure the optimization of actions and resources. Table 3 presents the total points allocated to each activity by all the institutions analyzed, employing an inverse scoring scale for analysis akin to the methodology of the preceding question.

Table 3 - Main activities carried out in the internationalization process

	Activities	Final Score
1 st	Partnerships with institutions/organizations abroad	244
2 nd	International research collaborations	222
3 rd	Increased study abroad for Brazilian students	210
4 th	Faculty development	188
5 th	Recruitment of international students	169
6 th	Internationalization of the curriculum and/or extracurricular activities	164

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The principal activity for the international integration of institutions was "partnerships with institutions/organizations abroad," followed by "international research collaborations." This pattern persisted in the individual analyses, with most institutions prioritizing international partnerships and research collaboration. The sole exception was Institution "E", which, according to the respondents, focuses primarily on developing activities aimed at facilitating the mobility of Brazilian students.

4.3 The pillars of comprehensive internationalization

The proposed questions aimed to examine institutional internationalization based on the axes of the ACE (2020) model, considering the view of institutional actors. Bordogna (2017) highlights the importance of "frontier agents" — such as professors, administrators, and professionals involved in international partnerships - in overcoming the institutional and cultural barriers that hinder internationalization efforts. In this sense, the perception of institutional actors on the axes of comprehensive internationalization is crucial. Within an articulated institutional commitment to internationalization, the results indicate that institutions committed to internationalization have specific plans and units dedicated exclusively to this advancement and include the issue as one of their strategic priorities. They also have internationalization committees, stakeholders dedicated to internationalization development, and periodic evaluations.

The lack of clear and measurable goals, or the lack of awareness of them on the part of some institutional actors, may suggest that the internationalization plan is more prominently present among managers without reaching the entire university community. Stallivieri (2017) points out that ineffective communication of internationalization objectives and strategies can limit the involvement of institutional actors, hindering the implementation of initiatives. For internationalization to be comprehensive, it is essential to integrate with the institution's other activities, and there is a consolidated strategic planning and evaluation process.

Therefore, it is essential to analyze the other axes proposed in the ACE model, explaining the respondents' view of the inclusion of internationalization in the activities carried out and allowing an analysis of how the institution articulates internationalization in its processes. In this way, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with certain statements on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.

Thus, the second pillar refers to administrative leadership, structure, and personnel, addressing issues related to the involvement of the institution's managers in the internationalization process and defining a structure of resources and trained personnel for the development of internationalization. This point was addressed through four statements, and the results obtained for this pillar can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4 - Measures of central tendency for the "administrative leadership, structure and personnel" axis

Affirmations	Mean	Median	Error deviation	Variance
At my institution, a single unit leads internationalization activities and programs	3.16	3.00	1.386	1.921
At my institution, there is a full-time manager who supervises or coordinates various internationalization activities or programs	3.91	4.00	1.214	1.474
At my institution, there is a commitment from institutional managers to the process of internationalizing the institution	4.04	4.00	0.865	0.749
My institution's internationalization unit carries out activities that go beyond managing mobility processes and cooperation agreements.	3.89	4.00	1.160	1.346

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Data analysis indicates that respondents acknowledge the existence of at least a foundational framework within institutions for fostering internationalization, alongside a discernible commitment from management towards this objective. The offices responsible for international affairs have begun to expand their activities beyond mere

student mobility. Within the scope of comprehensive internationalization, the internationalization units must function as supportive entities, enabling the engagement of diverse academic units (Hudzik, 2011) instead of being perceived merely as bureaucratic entities tasked with overseeing mobility policies and cooperation agreements.

The pillar encompassing curriculum, extracurricular activities, and learning outcomes is intrinsically connected to domestic internationalization policies. This includes the management of curriculum by incorporating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into assorted institutional proceedings, such as teaching and evaluation processes. This subject was examined through six statements, as demonstrated in Table 5.

Table 5 - Measures of central tendency for the "curriculum, extracurricular activities and learning outcomes" axis

Affirmations	Mean	Me- dian	Error devia- tion	Vari- ance
My institution has learning targets for global or international student issues	2.91	3.00	1.106	1.224
My institution is involved in initiatives to internationalize the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum	3.42	4.00	1.068	1.141
In the last three years (2018, 2019, and 2020), my institution has offered extracurricular courses or programs with a global or international orientation.	3.18	3.00	1.088	1.183
My institution uses technologies other than email and web pages to facilitate its internationalization activities	3.56	4.00	1.102	1.215
My institution offers seminars, workshops, and other programs on the internationalization of subjects and the curriculum.	3.16	3.00	1.162	1.350
My institution offers seminars, workshops, or other programs on the use of technology to internationalize courses	2.74	3.00	0.936	0.876

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The results indicate initiatives to internationalize the curriculum; however, the maturation of these actions is essential for developing a more comprehensive policy (Knight, 2020; Morosini, 2006). Additionally, there is disagreement regarding targets to assess student learning on global issues, corroborating Leask (2001) perception that this is a crucial point for developing students' international competencies. Although

some institutions utilize information technology to support internationalization, respondents emphasize the lack of ongoing training for staff. Hudzik (2011) and Gacel-Ávila (2012) assert that technology plays a critical role in this process, although Green and Mertova (2016) contend that continuous training of educators is fundamental to guarantee the success of these initiatives and to prepare students adequately.

Faculty support is identified as one of the principal barriers to, and concurrently, one of the most significant variables in comprehensive internationalization (Hudzik, 2011). It is, therefore, crucial to analyze the axis pertaining to Faculty Policies and Practices, as discussed in the questions presented in Table 6.

Table 6 - Measures of central tendency for the "Teaching policies and practices" axis

Affirmations	Mean	Me- dian	Error de-via- tion	Vari- ance
In the last three years (2018, 2019, and 2020), my institution has offered opportunities for teachers to develop their global or international competence.	3.40	4.00	1.050	1.102
My institution monitors the international teaching and/or research collaborations of faculty members (e.g., using a database)	3.56	4.00	0.945	0.893
My institution offers opportunities and supports faculty participation in teaching, conducting research, and attending conferences abroad	3.51	4.00	0.966	0.933

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The results indicate that respondents acknowledge the institutions provide certain international development opportunities for their teaching staff and oversee international collaborations in teaching and research. However, these opportunities have not been made available to all, and there exists potential to expand both the range of courses offered and the accessibility of these initiatives to the teaching staff, thereby fostering increased involvement with internationalization efforts. Another critical dimension is Student Mobility, frequently regarded as the primary goal of internationalization, as depicted in Table 7.

Table 7 - Measures of central tendency for the "Student mobility" axis

Affirmations	Mean	Me- dian	Error de- viation	Vari- ance
My institution has a recruitment plan for international students	3.05	3.00	1.007	1.015

My institution has set targets for the percentage of students who will study abroad during their degree	2.65	3.00	1.044	1.089
At my institution, student mobility is the main objective of internationalization	2.91	3.00	1.169	1.367

Source: Prepared by the authors.

In the axis analyzed, student mobility is posited to be one of the various forms of internationalization actively developed and encouraged by all educational institutions. This analysis seeks to scrutinize the focus and outcomes of such a policy. Through the posed questions and the set of answers provided, it becomes apparent that mobility, encompassing both inbound and outbound flows, is a phenomenon lacking a well-defined institutional policy framework, devoid of strategies for student attraction, and bereft of clear outcomes resulting from the mobility process.

The final axis of comprehensive internationalization, as the ACE (2020) Model proposes, pertains to collaborations and partnerships forged by the institution. Details concerning this aspect are delineated in Table 8.

Table 8 - Measures of central tendency for the "Collaboration and partnerships" axis

Affirmations	Mean	Median	Error deviation	Variance
In the last three years (2018, 2019, and 2020), my institution has increased the number of international partnerships	3.96	4.00	0.823	0.677
My institution has a formal strategy for developing international partnerships	3.61	4.00	0.921	0.848
At my institution, there are specific guidelines for developing or evaluating existing partnerships	3.05	3.00	1.042	1.086
My institution has identified specific countries or regions for expanding its international activity	3.56	4.00	1.035	1.072

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Developing national and international partnerships is common in the globalized context and essential for comprehensive internationalization. Such partnerships need to generate synergy, bringing greater benefits than if carried out in isolation (Hudzik, 2011). Although respondents indicate an increase in the number of partnerships, there

are still difficulties in assessing their effectiveness. Examining the ACE model of comprehensive internationalization reveals that institutions are progressing in this area, with actions present across various axes. However, these actions are often implemented in an unplanned manner or through individual initiatives. The responses suggest that these practices are not yet fully established and may be limited to a restricted group, lacking clear strategic implementation.

Finally, it is known that the adequacy and effective management of resources, as highlighted by Leask (2001) and Crosling, Edwards and Schroder (2008), the adequacy and effective management of resources are fundamental to overcoming obstacles and ensuring the successful implementation of the internationalization process. Recent research also emphasizes faculty involvement in the successful internationalization of higher education institutions. This is pointed out by Green and Whitsed (2015), Green and Mertova (2016), Leask *et al.* (2020), and Whitsed *et al.* (2021). These studies suggest a paradigm shift and indicate the need for a deeper understanding of organizational dynamics to promote effective teacher participation in this process.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study shows that, albeit cautiously, internationalization has been advancing in the institutions analyzed in Rio Grande do Sul. This finding aligns with the situation observed nationally by Teodoro, Stallivieri and Melo (2019). Brazil exhibits characteristics indicative of internationalization processes, such as the deliberate intensification of internationalization activities and the implementation of structured international cooperation programs (Neves; Barbosa, 2020).

The perceptions of institutional stakeholders participating in the research highlight substantial differences regarding the internationalization process in higher education institutions. Despite institutional progress and the increasingly broader inclusion of internationalization within institutional strategies—previously confined to a select few—the results indicate that considerable work remains. For internationalization initiatives to profoundly impact the institutional landscape and prepare professionals for the global market, a significant enhancement of existing policies and practices is imperative.

One of the principal limitations of this study was the challenge of accessing reliable data and information. Obstacles such as the unavailability of information on internationalization at the institutions, the difficulty of contacting potential respondents, and the lack of government data impeded a more robust analysis and measurement of internationalization processes and actions.

Understanding the comprehensive internationalization process in Brazilian higher education paves the way for various types of research. Given the findings of the study, which sought to provide a contemporaneous portrait of internationalization in a holistic internationalization context, future research should explore the impediments

among the variables to be analyzed. This approach will facilitate a more integrative process among the diverse sources and actors involved in internationalization.

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