

Original article



## The strategic role of international cooperation in the development of higher education

**El papel estratégico de la cooperación internacional en el desarrollo de la educación superior**

**O papel estratégico da cooperação internacional no desenvolvimento do ensino superior**

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### ABSTRACT

The internationalization of higher education plays a strategic role in institutional strengthening, improving academic quality, and enhancing the social impact of universities, especially in emerging contexts. Within this framework, this article analyzes the role of international cooperation in the social and educational development of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute in southern Angola, based on the perceptions of its academic community. A mixed-methods approach, descriptive-analytical in nature, was adopted, combining the analysis of institutional documents, surveys, and semi-structured interviews with academic administrators, faculty, and undergraduate and graduate students. The results show that international cooperation is valued as a strategic axis

for strengthening the institution's core processes, particularly academic training, scientific research, university outreach, and institutional management. Furthermore, opportunities for academic mobility and professional development are recognized as significant benefits for strengthening competencies and integrating into international scientific networks. The study highlights the high level of motivation and willingness of academic stakeholders toward international cooperation, which facilitates the early adoption of internationalization policies. It concludes that the impact of international cooperation will depend on the alignment between institutional policies, organizational capacities, and the attitudes of the academic community.

**Keywords:** higher education; international cooperation; institutional development; Angola.

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## RESUMEN

La internacionalización de la educación superior desempeña un papel estratégico en el fortalecimiento institucional, la mejora de la calidad académica y la proyección social de las instituciones universitarias, especialmente en contextos emergentes. En este marco, el artículo analiza el papel de la cooperación internacional en el desarrollo social y educativo del Instituto Superior Politécnico Gregório Semedo, en el sur de Angola, a partir de las percepciones de su comunidad académica. Se adoptó un enfoque metodológico mixto, de carácter descriptivo-analítico, que combinó el análisis de documentos institucionales, encuestas y entrevistas semiestructuradas a gestores académicos, docentes y estudiantes de licenciatura y posgraduación. Los resultados evidencian que la cooperación internacional es valorada como un eje estratégico para el fortalecimiento de los procesos sustantivos de la institución, en particular la formación académica, la investigación científica, la extensión universitaria y la gestión institucional. Asimismo, se reconocen las oportunidades de movilidad académica y desarrollo profesional como beneficios relevantes para el fortalecimiento de competencias y la inserción en redes científicas internacionales. Se destaca una elevada motivación y disposición de los actores académicos hacia la cooperación internacional, lo que favorece la apropiación temprana de las políticas de internacionalización. Se concluye que el impacto de la cooperación internacional dependerá del alineamiento entre políticas institucionales, capacidades organizativas y actitudes de la comunidad académica.

**Palabras clave:** educación superior; cooperación internacional; desarrollo institucional; Angola.

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## RESUMO

A internacionalização do ensino superior desempenha um papel estratégico no fortalecimento institucional, na melhoria da qualidade acadêmica e na ampliação do impacto social das universidades, especialmente em contextos emergentes. Nesse contexto, este artigo analisa o papel da cooperação internacional no desenvolvimento social e educacional do Instituto Politécnico Superior Gregório Semedo, no sul de Angola, com base nas percepções de sua comunidade acadêmica. Adotou-se uma abordagem mista, descritiva-analítica, combinando a análise de documentos institucionais, questionários e entrevistas semiestruturadas com administradores acadêmicos, docentes e alunos de graduação e pós-graduação. Os resultados mostram que a cooperação internacional é valorizada como um eixo estratégico para o fortalecimento dos processos centrais da instituição, particularmente a formação acadêmica, a pesquisa científica, a extensão universitária e a gestão institucional. Além disso, as oportunidades de mobilidade acadêmica e desenvolvimento profissional são reconhecidas como benefícios significativos para o fortalecimento de competências e a integração em redes científicas internacionais. Destaca-se um alto nível de motivação e disposição dos atores acadêmicos em relação à cooperação internacional, o que facilita a adoção precoce de políticas de internacionalização. Conclui-se que o impacto da cooperação internacional dependerá do alinhamento entre as políticas institucionais, as capacidades organizacionais e as atitudes da comunidade acadêmica.

**Palavras-chave:** ensino superior; cooperação internacional; desenvolvimento institucional; Angola.

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, internationalization and academic cooperation have become strategic pillars for institutional development, improving educational quality, and strengthening scientific output. The intensification of knowledge globalization, the advancement of digital technologies, and the increasing complexity of social, economic, and environmental challenges have redefined the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which are now called upon to assume an active role in generating relevant, innovative, and socially engaged knowledge.

Recent research agrees that internationalization effectively contributes to institutional development when it is linked to the strategic plans of higher education institutions and is geared towards academic

quality, educational innovation, and the social relevance of knowledge (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2018; Morosini & Mentges, 2020; UNESCO, 202; Domínguez, 2025). In this context, international cooperation in higher education has undergone a significant conceptual evolution. From traditional approaches focused primarily on academic mobility, there has been a shift towards more comprehensive models, oriented towards building academic networks, co-producing knowledge, and strengthening institutional capacities.

From a current perspective, international academic cooperation is conceived as a relational, dynamic, and bidirectional process, based on shared responsibility among the actors involved. Along these lines, Brito *et al.* (2025) emphasize that internationalization should be analyzed not only from its institutional outcomes, but also from the perceptions, experiences, and conditions of inclusion of academic actors. Their findings demonstrate that positive perceptions of internationalization are closely linked to the existence of clear institutional policies, academic support mechanisms, and real opportunities for participation, which reinforces the need for internationalization with an inclusive and socially responsible approach.

In addition, recent reports from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2025) warn that, while international student mobility remains a relevant component of internationalization, it faces transformations associated with inequalities in access, geopolitical changes, and new hybrid and virtual modalities. Consequently, the need to integrate mobility into broader strategies for academic cooperation and institutional development is emphasized, avoiding fragmented or exclusively instrumental approaches.

The specialized literature also highlights the value of international academic networks as key spaces for educational innovation, knowledge transfer, and the strengthening of research. Participation in networks fosters the exchange of best pedagogical practices, the development of collaborative projects, and access to competitive funding, contributing to the strengthening of the core functions of higher education institutions: education, research, outreach, and academic management (UNESCO, 2019; OECD, 2025). However, these benefits depend largely on the institutional capacity to manage cooperation and on the ownership of these processes by the academic community.

In the African context, international cooperation has been recognized as a strategic factor for strengthening university systems and developing highly qualified human capital. However, several studies warn of persistent challenges, such as the sustainability of partnerships, asymmetries in the

definition of academic agendas, and dependence on external funding (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). These tensions make the analysis of academic actors' perceptions particularly relevant, given their direct impact on the legitimacy and effectiveness of internationalization policies.

Angola is fully integrated into these dynamics. In recent decades, its higher education system has undergone significant expansion, accompanied by efforts aimed at improving academic quality and scientific output. However, structural challenges persist, linked to the limited international integration of higher education institutions and the need to strengthen research and educational innovation. In this context, recent public policies have emphasized international cooperation as a key instrument for institutional development and the responsible internationalization of the university system.

Within this framework, the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute has defined an institutional strategy focused on international academic cooperation and networking. However, the success of this strategic approach depends largely on how administrators, faculty, and students perceive and value international cooperation as an opportunity for professional, institutional, and social development. Consequently, this study aims to analyze the perceptions of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute's academic community regarding the role of international cooperation in institutional development, considering its potential contribution to academic quality, scientific research, and educational innovation. By focusing on an institution undergoing international integration, the study provides a contextualized and relevant perspective to the contemporary debate on academic cooperation as a strategic axis for the development of higher education in African contexts.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Research focus and type**

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, primarily descriptive quantitative data complemented by interpretive qualitative analysis. It focuses on analyzing the perceptions of the academic community at the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute regarding the potential role of international cooperation in institutional development, academic quality, and educational innovation. This approach was chosen to identify, on the one hand, general trends, levels of agreement, and perception patterns among the various academic groups, and on the other hand, to delve into the

meanings, values, and expectations underlying these perceptions, thus fostering a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Given its scope, the research is descriptive-analytical in nature, as it aims to characterize existing perceptions and analyze convergences and divergences according to the institutional role of the participants, without manipulating variables or establishing causal relationships.

### **Research design**

A non-experimental, cross-sectional design is adopted, as the data are collected at a single point in time and the variables are observed in their natural context. Furthermore, a sequential explanatory design is employed, in which the quantitative phase precedes the qualitative one. The questionnaire results guide the selection of key informants and the development of the interview guides, allowing for a deeper exploration of aspects requiring more contextualized interpretation.

### **Study context**

This research is being conducted at the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute, an Angolan institution that, within the framework of its Institutional Development Plan and its Operational Plan for International Cooperation (2025-2027), projects international academic cooperation as a strategic pillar of its development. The recent formulation of internationalization policies makes the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute a relevant setting for analyzing the perceptions, expectations, and dispositions of the academic community at an initial stage of the systematic implementation of international cooperation.

### **Dimensions and indicators of the study**

The study is structured in a system of five interrelated dimensions, consistent with contemporary theoretical references on internationalization and academic cooperation, and applicable in a differentiated way to managers, teachers and students:

1. Perceptions on the role of international cooperation in strengthening the substantive processes of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute.
2. Perceptions of opportunities for academic mobility and professional development

3. Perceptions on the institutional conditions and the capacity of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute to manage international cooperation.
4. Perceptions about obstacles and challenges to their development.
5. Attitudes, motivation and disposition of academic actors towards international cooperation and networking.

These dimensions guided the development of the instruments, the processing of the data, and the interpretation of the results.

### **Population and sample**

The study population consisted of 756 subjects belonging to the main academic groups of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute: administrators (25), faculty (110), fourth-year undergraduate students in the regular daytime program (morning schedule) (371), and postgraduate students (250). Stratified probability sampling was used, considering each group as an independent stratum, with simple random selection within each stratum. This design ensured the representativeness of the groups and allowed for comparative analyses consistent with the study objectives.

The final sample consisted of 244 participants: 17 academic managers, 45 teachers, 94 fourth-year undergraduate students and 88 postgraduate students, with acceptable coverage levels in all strata, which reinforces the descriptive validity of the study.

### **Data collection techniques and instruments**

Three complementary techniques were used:

- a) Survey, applied using a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale, organized according to the dimensions of the study.
- b) Semi-structured interviews, aimed at deepening the institutional vision on international cooperation, its opportunities, challenges and impact expectations;
- c) Documentary analysis, applied to relevant institutional and regulatory documents, which allowed for contextualizing and triangulating the empirical data.

## Data analysis procedures

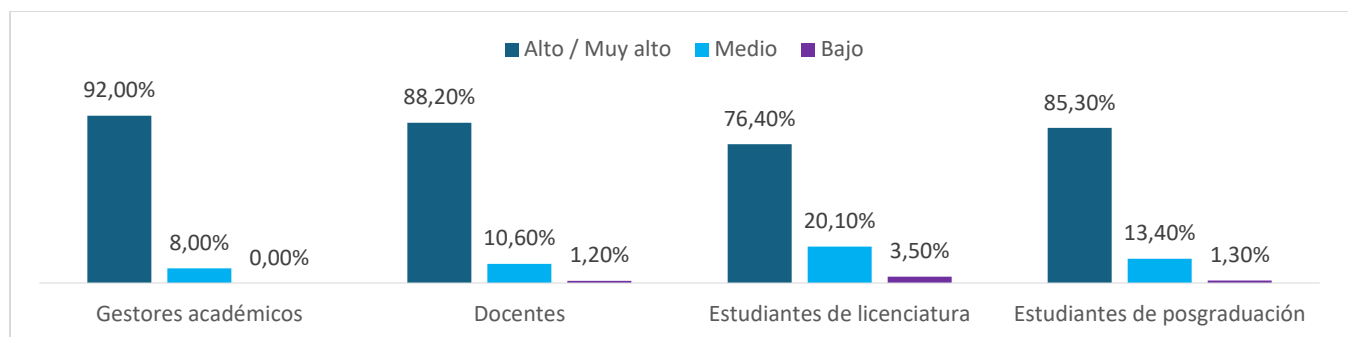
Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, as well as comparative analyses between groups when relevant. Qualitative data were processed using thematic analysis, through progressive coding procedures that allowed for the identification of interpretive categories and subcategories. The integration of quantitative, qualitative, and documentary results was carried out in the discussion phase, fostering a comprehensive and contextualized interpretation of the phenomenon under study.

## RESULTS

This section presents and analyzes the results obtained from a study of the perceptions of the academic community at the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute —academic administrators, faculty, and undergraduate and graduate students— regarding the role of international cooperation in institutional development, academic quality, and educational innovation. The analysis is organized according to the five analytical dimensions defined in the methodological framework, integrating the main quantitative results and their substantive interpretation, supported by descriptive tables and figures.

The first dimension analyzed the perceptions of academic actors on the potential role of international cooperation in strengthening the institution's substantive processes: training, research, university extension and academic management.

As can be seen in figure 1, the results show a broadly positive assessment of international cooperation as a strategic axis of institutional development.



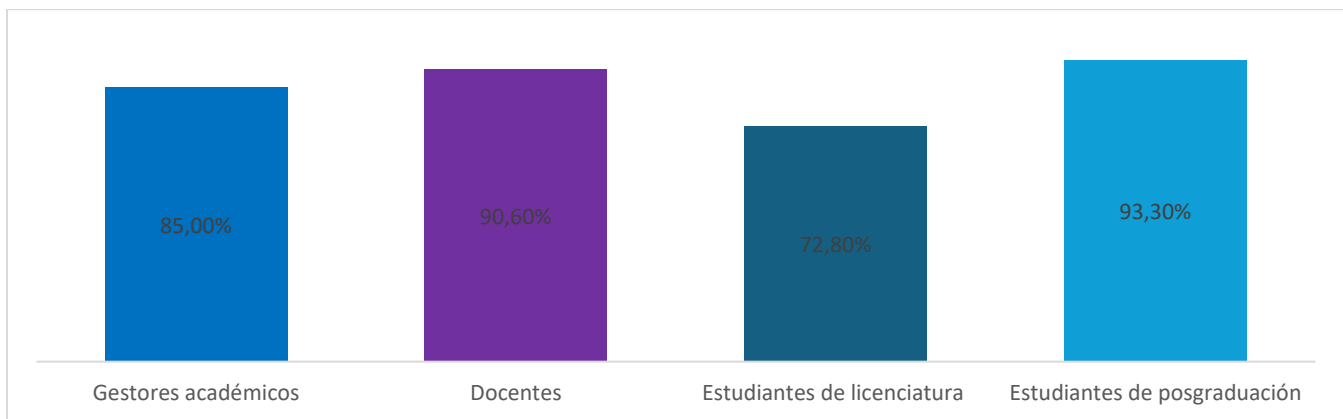
**Figure 1.** Perception of the impact of international cooperation on the substantive processes of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute

Academic administrators show the highest level of agreement (92%) regarding the positive impact of international cooperation, which is consistent with their strategic role in institutional planning and management. Faculty and graduate students also express high ratings, while undergraduate students, although mostly positive, show a slightly more moderate perception.

This result suggests that international cooperation is perceived as a cross-cutting factor in institutional strengthening, especially regarding the improvement of academic quality, curriculum modernization, and the consolidation of scientific research. A key finding is that even among undergraduate students—traditionally less exposed to direct experiences of cooperation—a favorable perception predominates, indicating a high potential for future institutional adoption.

The second dimension focused on analyzing perceptions of the opportunities that international cooperation can offer in terms of academic mobility, scientific exchanges, and professional development.

The results show a high expectation regarding mobility opportunities, particularly among postgraduate students and teachers (Figure 2).



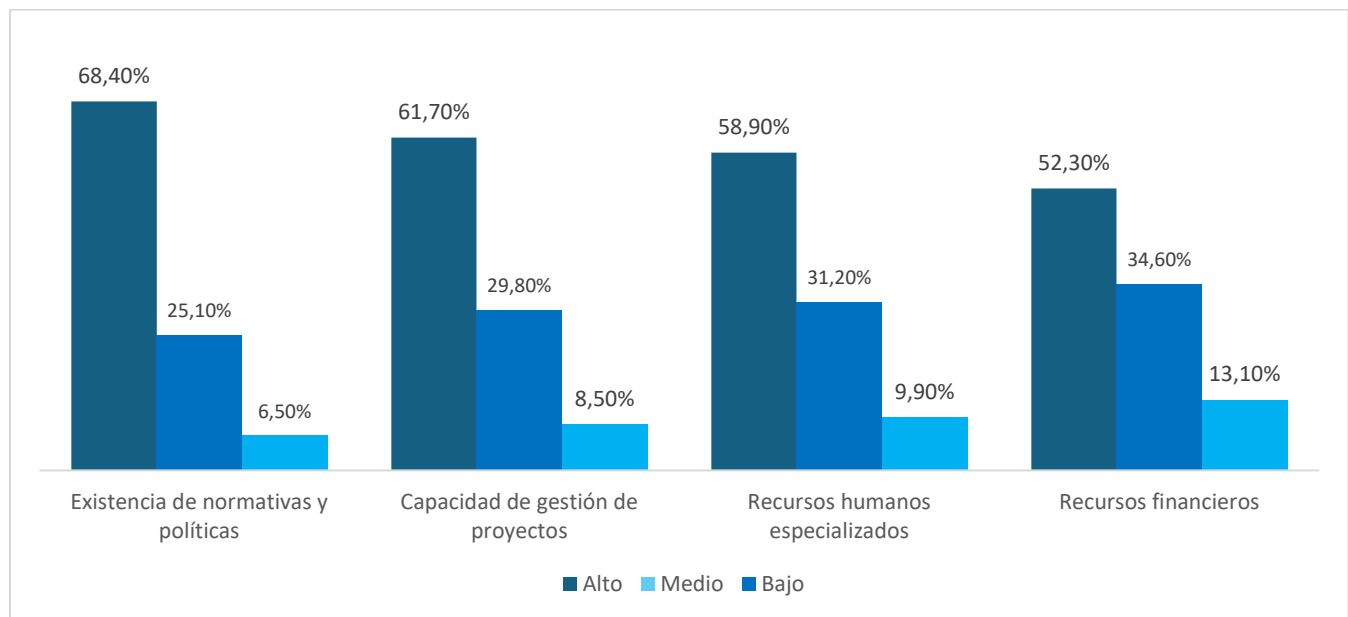
**Figure 2.** Level of agreement with mobility and professional development opportunities (%)

Graduate students stand out as the group with the highest expectations (93.3%), which is related to their direct interest in research, advanced training, and integration into international scientific networks. For faculty, mobility is perceived not only as an opportunity for individual development but also as a means to improve teaching, update content, and strengthen scientific output.

A novel aspect of the study is that managers conceive of academic mobility as a strategic tool for institutional positioning, beyond its individual training dimension, revealing a vision aligned with contemporary policies of responsible internationalization.

The third dimension analyzed perceptions of the institutional capacity of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute to effectively plan, manage and implement international cooperation.

The results show a moderately positive assessment, although less optimistic than in the previous dimensions (Figure 3).

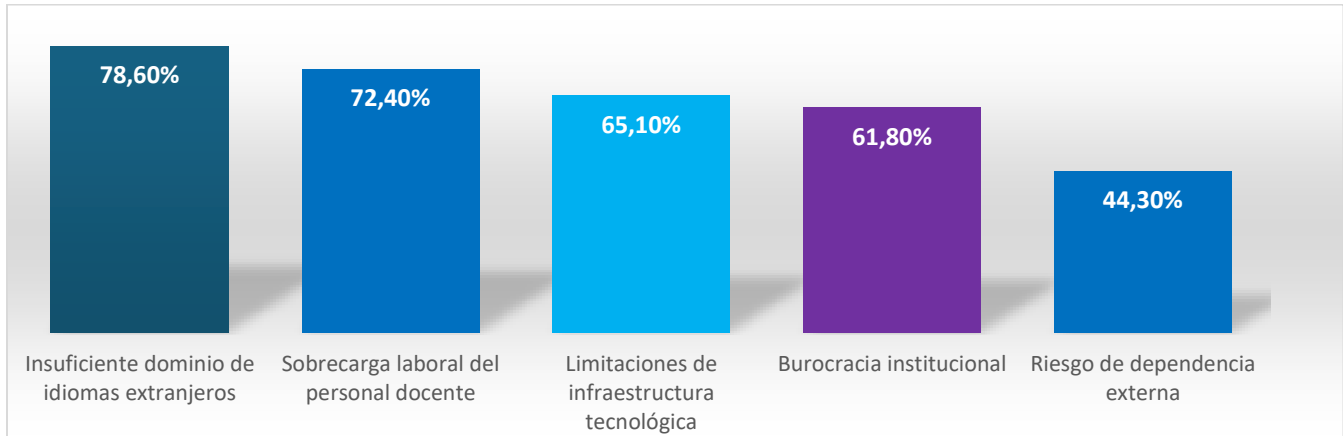


**Figure 3.** Perception of the institutional conditions for international cooperation (%)

These results highlight a perceived gap between the potential of international cooperation and current institutional capacities for its implementation. While there is recognition of regulatory and strategic progress—such as the formulation of domestic policies—limitations in specialized human resources and funding are identified, particularly by faculty and administrators.

This finding constitutes one of the critical contributions of the study, highlighting that the discursive appropriation of international cooperation is not always accompanied by an equivalent perception of operational readiness, which can affect the sustainability of future initiatives.

The fourth dimension was oriented towards identifying the main perceived obstacles and challenges that could limit the effective development of international cooperation in the context of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute (Figure 4).



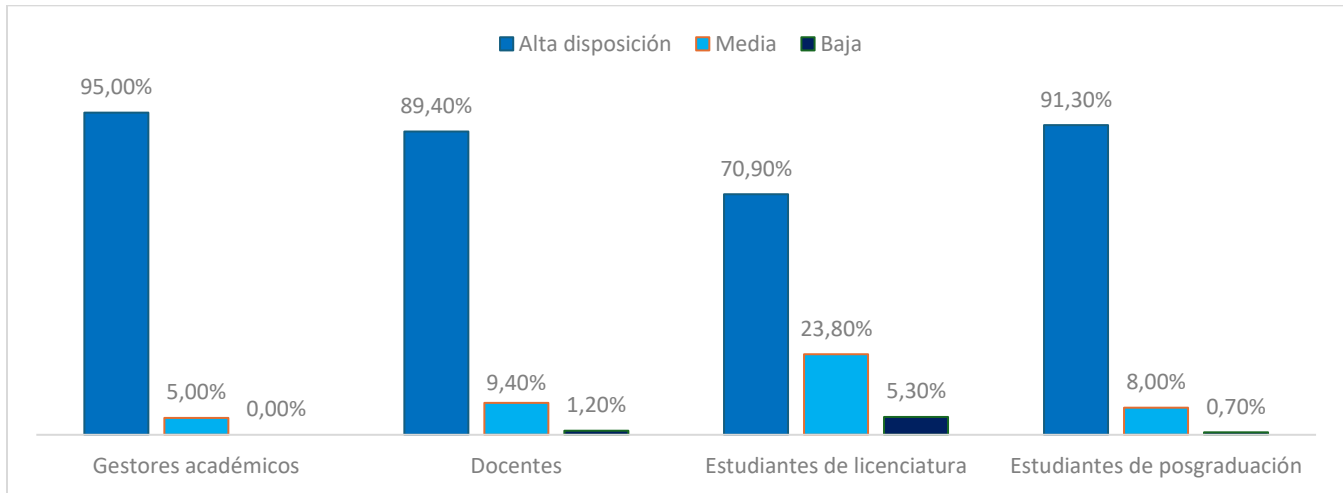
**Figure 4.** Obstacles perceived most frequently (%)

Insufficient language proficiency emerges as the most frequently cited obstacle, which aligns with findings reported in similar studies in African and Latin American contexts. Work overload and infrastructural limitations are also perceived as significant barriers, particularly by teachers.

One relevant finding is that the risk of external dependence, although present, appears with less relative weight, indicating a mostly pragmatic attitude towards international cooperation, more focused on its benefits than on its possible risks.

The fifth dimension analyzed the attitudes, levels of motivation and willingness of academic actors to actively participate in international cooperation initiatives and academic networking.

The data reveal a high general willingness towards international cooperation (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Willingness to participate in international cooperation initiatives (%)

Managers and graduate students show the highest levels of motivation, followed by faculty. Undergraduate students, while generally showing a willingness to participate, express higher levels of indecision, suggesting the need for early awareness strategies and gradual integration into collaborative experiences.

This result brings a novel element to the study: international cooperation is not perceived as an additional burden, but as an opportunity for academic and professional growth, provided that favorable institutional conditions exist.

Overall, the results show that the academic community of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute holds a broadly favorable and strategic view of international cooperation as a cornerstone of institutional development. However, the study also reveals significant tensions between high expectations and perceptions of the institution's actual capacity to manage cooperation sustainably.

The anticipatory nature of the analysis -focused on perceptions prior to intensive participation in international projects- constitutes one of the main contributions of the study, by offering valuable inputs for institutional decision-making, the design of internationalization policies and the strengthening of internal capacities.

From a psychoeducational and institutional perspective, the results suggest that the success of international cooperation at the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute will depend not only

on the existence of external alliances, but also on the alignment between policies, resources, skills and motivations of academic actors, consolidating a culture of cooperation based on networking, educational innovation and the social relevance of knowledge.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of the perceptions of administrators, faculty, and undergraduate and graduate students at the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute reveals patterns consistent with recent international literature on cooperation and internationalization in higher education, while also providing contextualized evidence from an emerging African environment. The results confirm that international cooperation is perceived as a cross-cutting axis for strengthening the institution's core processes: education, research, outreach, and academic management.

In line with the arguments of Brito *et al.* (2025), positive perceptions of international cooperation are associated with its potential to expand academic opportunities, strengthen institutional capacities, and promote inclusive internationalization practices. In the case of the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute, administrators highlight its strategic value for institutional development, while faculty and graduate students recognize its impact on research and educational innovation. It is noteworthy that undergraduate students, even with limited direct experience, express a favorable perception, which aligns with the idea of "anticipatory internationalization" based on positive expectations and representations (Mentges & Costa Morosini, 2023).

The results relating to academic mobility and professional development align with the trends identified by the OECD (2025), which underscores the continued centrality of international mobility, albeit increasingly integrated into broader cooperation strategies and academic networks. In the study, the higher valuation of mobility by faculty and postgraduate students confirms its association with the development of advanced skills, employability, and scientific output, as noted by Wang *et al.* (2025). However, the moderate appreciation among undergraduate students suggests the need for early awareness strategies and complementary modalities, such as internationalization at home.

Regarding institutional conditions, the moderately positive perceptions, coupled with the recognition of limitations in human, financial, and technological resources, reflect a recurring tension in developing country contexts. This finding aligns with studies that highlight the gap between internationalization frameworks and the actual operational capacity of higher education institutions

(Mentges & Costa, 2023; OECD, 2025). In this respect, the results from the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute reinforce the importance of strengthening management structures, academic leadership, and specialized training to ensure the sustainability of international cooperation.

Regarding the identified obstacles—insufficient language proficiency, excessive workload, and institutional bureaucracy—the findings align with barriers widely documented in recent international literature. Among the main perceived challenges are insufficient language proficiency, excessive workload, and institutional bureaucracy, findings that coincide with research conducted in African and Latin American contexts (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2018; Morosini & Mentges, 2020; UNESCO, 2019; Domínguez, 2025; OECD, 2025). It is significant that the risk of external dependence is perceived less intensely, suggesting a pragmatic assessment of the immediate benefits of cooperation over its potential structural implications, thus adding a relevant nuance to the academic debate.

Finally, the high level of willingness and motivation toward international cooperation, especially among administrators and postgraduate students, demonstrates favorable institutional capital for the implementation of internationalization policies. Consistent with Brito *et al.* (2025), these positive attitudes constitute a key factor for the institutional ownership of cooperation and for the success of future strategies. Overall, the results confirm global trends and provide contextualized empirical evidence that reinforces the academic and practical relevance of the study for the analysis of international cooperation in Angolan higher education.

The study analyzed the perceptions of academic administrators, faculty, and undergraduate and graduate students at the Gregório Semedo Higher Polytechnic Institute regarding the role of international cooperation in institutional development, the transfer of scientific knowledge, and educational innovation, within the context of the internationalization of Angolan higher education. The results demonstrate that international cooperation is conceived as a cross-cutting strategic axis with the potential to strengthen the institution's core processes—teaching, research, university outreach, and academic management—in an integrated manner.

The positive assessment of international cooperation is more consistent among administrators and faculty, and extends to students as well, especially postgraduate students, thus establishing a favorable foundation for consolidating institutional internationalization policies. Likewise, academic mobility and professional development are recognized as significant benefits, contributing to the

strengthening of research skills, academic updating, and integration into international scientific networks.

The study identifies, however, institutional limitations related to human, financial, and technological resources, as well as obstacles linked to language proficiency, workload, and infrastructure, which can affect the sustainability of international cooperation. Despite this, the high motivation and willingness of academic stakeholders to participate in cooperation initiatives constitutes a significant institutional asset. Consequently, it concludes that the impact of international cooperation will depend on the effective alignment of institutional policies, organizational capacities, and the attitudes of the academic community, as well as on strengthening competencies and structures that guarantee inclusive internationalization geared toward academic and social impact.

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### **Conflict of interest**

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

### **Authors' contribution**

The authors participated in the design and writing of the article, in the search and analysis of the information contained in the consulted bibliography.



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