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Opening the University, Not the World: Affirmative Action and the Second Threshold of International Student Mobility

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Abstract

The massification of Brazilian higher education has opened federal universities to students they long excluded, and the 2012 Quota Law formalised this opening. International academic mobility, however, remains governed by merit-based selection, blind to the social, economic and educational inequalities between students. Research on unequal access to study abroad centres on the Global North; studies of Brazilian affirmative action assess the admission, retention and outcomes of quota-admitted students (*cotistas*), not their access to international mobility. The Quota Law suspended social selection at university entry: where and how does selection return when students leave to study abroad? The article draws on 39 biographical interviews, conducted in 2023 and 2024 with former students of two federal universities in Brazil's Northeast who had all studied abroad, and on interviews with university staff and institutional data. Drawing on the sociology of capital, it introduces the concept of a *second threshold*: the selection that reintroduces social background at the point of departure. Affirmative action opens the university but leaves untouched the conditions of international competition: funding, language certification and information. Students' capital takes effect only when public policies and institutions take it into account; without a targeted policy, inherited capital prevails. The comparison of the two universities shows that the institutional framework weighs more than individual effort. The concept calls for assessing inclusion policies beyond admission, down to the resources that universities distribute afterwards, international mobility among them.

1. Introduction

Study abroad is socially selective. Students whose parents did not attend higher education plan a period of study abroad less often (Lörz et al., 2016), and financial aid for study abroad can reinforce its social selectivity instead of reducing it (Netz & Finger, 2016). Middle-class students use study abroad to distinguish themselves in expanding higher education systems (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012). Most of this research draws on European data, and the model of Lörz et al. (2016) explains the intention to study abroad, not departure. Between intention and departure lie calls for applications, eligibility requirements and financial aid. Inclusion policies at university entry rarely extend to study abroad (Van Mol & Perez-Encinas, 2022).

The concept of a *second threshold* names this passage. Affirmative action opens a first threshold, admission to university; the second, access to study abroad, can remain socially selective. The question is what happens when a policy corrects inequalities of access by school origin, income and race at university entry but leaves access to study abroad to criteria identical for all.

Brazil ran both policies at scale. Since 2012, its federal universities have reserved half of their undergraduate places for students who completed all their secondary education in public schools, with sub-quotas for students from low-income families and for those who self-declare as black (*preto*), brown (*pardo*) or Indigenous (Brazil, 2012). The Quota Law changed the social and ethnoracial composition of entrants to federal universities (Senkevics & Mello, 2019; Heringer, 2024). In the same decade, Ciência sem Fronteiras (Science without Borders, CsF), launched in 2011, funded stays at foreign universities, mainly for undergraduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), until its discontinuation between 2015 and 2017 (Granja & Carneiro, 2021). One policy opened Brazilian universities to graduates of public schools; the other opened foreign universities to Brazilian students in STEM. Research on the Quota Law has concentrated on access and, to a lesser extent, on persistence and degree completion (Senkevics & Mello, 2019; Heringer, 2024). Studies of Brazilian students in Portugal show how social class, scholarships and a shared language shape the choice of destination (Iorio & Pereira, 2018; Da Palma Alves & Iorio, 2021). The access of quota-admitted students (*cotistas*) to study abroad has received little attention.

This article examines that access in two federal universities of Brazil's Northeast. Three features make the question visible there: racial sub-quotas written into national law, a federal university student body in which *pretos* and *pardos* form the majority (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2023), and a position far from the Southeast, where the most prestigious public universities concentrate. The argument, drawn from student and staff accounts, is that selection operates before academic assessment: through the cost of the stay, paid language certification and unequal access to information on calls and, where funding exists, through grade-based ranking, which turns unequal study conditions, such as paid work during studies, into unequal transcripts. Every *cotista* in the corpus who crossed the threshold relied on institutional financial support.

Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework and defines the second threshold. Section 3 presents the Brazilian case and the data. Section 4 follows the threshold at its three levels: resources, dispositions and the hierarchy of destinations. Section 5 discusses what the concept adds to research on study abroad and affirmative action, and where it should apply.

2. Theoretical framework: from intention to departure

The article draws on the sociology of capital: it examines the economic, cultural and social capital that students inherit, and the conditions under which policies and institutions give that capital effect. Lörz et al. (2016) explain why students whose parents hold no higher education degree intend to study abroad less often. Drawing on rational choice theory, they break the decision into expected costs, expected benefits and perceived probability of success; social origin affects each term, above all through the earlier educational trajectory, which shapes students' academic performance and attainment. Netz (2015) identifies the main deterrents: financial cost, separation from family and partner, and time

lost in the degree. These studies measure intention. Netz and Finger (2016) show that, in Germany between 1991 and 2012, support for study abroad reinforced its social selectivity instead of reducing it: the design of programmes, not only students' choices, shapes who leaves.

Two classic concepts help read the passage from intention to act. Boudon (1973) distinguished the primary effects of social origin, which work through school performance, from its secondary effects, which work through choices made at equal performance: lower-class students eliminate themselves from demanding educational tracks because they weigh costs and risks differently. Bourdieu (1972) described the causality of the probable: agents adjust their aspirations to the chances objectively available to people in their position. Lower-class students thus internalise the verdict of selection before it is pronounced. Bourdieu's notion of the cleft habitus (*habitus clivé*) adds what models of intention overlook (Bourdieu, 1997, 2004). It designates a durable division, embodied in dispositions, between the conditions that formed the habitus and the positions later occupied; Bourdieu used it to analyse his own trajectory (Bourdieu, 2004). It is not a passing difficulty of adjustment. For first-generation students, the division generates doubt and a sense of illegitimacy, even when academic skills are present. The decision to apply for mobility then involves this internal tension as well as a calculation of costs.

Raftery and Hout (1993) showed, for Irish secondary education, that expansion reduces class inequalities in transition rates only once the most advantaged groups have saturated their demand; until then, inequality is maximally maintained. Duru-Bellat and Kieffer (2008) showed that the expansion of higher education does not dissolve social inequalities in educational attainment but displaces them towards later stages and more selective tracks. Lucas (2001) generalised the argument: advantaged groups secure whatever advantage is commonly available, a quantitative one where a transition is not yet universal (whether students continue at all), a qualitative one where it nearly is (the kind of education they receive). International mobility is one such stage. As European mobility schemes opened to wider social groups, they became stratified, and students from lower-income families clustered in schemes of lesser value (Courtois, 2018; Waters & Brooks, 2021). Dias Lopes (2020) applied this reading to Brazil, treating international mobility as a transition through which advantaged classes maintain their position. Under CsF, students whose parents had more education and income took part more often and studied at more prestigious universities abroad; black, *pardo* and Indigenous students received scholarships less often than white students, before controlling for test scores; and students from universities in the North and Northeast studied at less prestigious universities abroad.

Dubet (2010) distinguishes two conceptions of social justice. Equality of opportunities (*égalité des chances*) seeks to give everyone the possibility of reaching the best positions on meritocratic grounds, and combats the discrimination that would distort the competition. Equality of positions (*égalité des places*) seeks to reduce the inequalities of income, living conditions, access to services and security attached to the positions themselves. For Dubet, equality of positions is the precondition for a fuller equality of opportunities.

The geography of mobility also carries a colonial hierarchy. Quijano (2000) described the coloniality of power as the persistence of hierarchies established under colonial rule; Mignolo (2001) extended the analysis to the production of knowledge. In the academic world system, the centres of the North do not hold equal prestige. From Brazil, Stallivieri and Vianna (2020) propose a model of responsible internationalisation built on five principles: balance, accountability, sustainability, inclusion and compliance (BASIC). The model calls on institutions to account for the social consequences of their international choices.

The second threshold builds on these works. It designates the selection that governs access to study abroad once affirmative action has opened access to university, and it locates the displacement of inequality at a transition that the Quota Law does not cover. It operates on both of Lucas's dimensions: whether students go abroad at all, and how, from academic exchange to short language course, and to which destination. It specifies the institutional sequence of calls, certificates and grants through which the displacement operates, and the ethnoracial categories that structure it in Brazil. It responds to the call of Dias Lopes (2020) for research on race and on what deters students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds: her national data show who took part in CsF; the second threshold shows how institutions sorted *cotistas* before departure. It also differs from the role of social class that Da Palma Alves and Iorio (2021) identify among students already in Portugal: it concerns students who entered through a redistributive policy. The analysis follows the threshold at three levels: resources and the criteria that convert them into selection (funding, language certification, information, grades, field of study); dispositions (the relation to legitimacy and the decision to apply); and the symbolic hierarchy of destinations.

3. The case and the data

3.1 Quotas and mobility programmes in Brazil

The Quota Law (Law No. 12,711/2012, Lei de Cotas) divides the reserve further. Half of the reserved places go to students whose family income per capita does not exceed 1.5 times the minimum wage; within each income group, places go to students who self-declare as *preto*, *pardo* or Indigenous in proportion to their share of the state population in the census (Brazil, 2012).

The law relies on the administrative categories of colour or race (*cor ou raça*) of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE): *branco* (white), *preto* (black), *pardo* (brown), *amarelo* (East Asian) and *indígena* (Indigenous). Statistical classification rests on self-declaration; everyday classification by others rests on appearance more than on ancestry (Telles, 2004; Guimarães, 2012). IBGE counts *pretos* and *pardos* separately;

the Quota Law groups *pretos*, *pardos* and *indígenas* in a single reserve (Brazil, 2012). In the 2022 census, *pardos* formed the majority of the population in Bahia and Ceará (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2023). McCowan (2007) argued that expansion without equity would confine disadvantaged students to courses of lower quality or lower value on the labour market. As access widened, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and *pretos* remained concentrated in less selective programmes (Carvalhaes & Ribeiro, 2019), and black, brown and Indigenous candidates entered higher education less often than white candidates with the same family income and academic performance (Carvalhaes et al., 2023).

The internationalisation of Brazilian higher education accelerated in the 2010s (Neves & Barbosa, 2020), with CsF as its flagship. CsF targeted STEM and sent most of its scholarship holders to the Global North, led by the United States (Granja & Carneiro, 2021; Manços & Coelho, 2017). In 2013, it removed Portugal from its destinations, because demand was too high and a Portuguese-speaking country did not serve its aim of foreign-language learning (Granja & Carneiro, 2021; Iorio, 2021). Beyond CsF, undergraduates could study abroad through bilateral agreements between universities, programmes such as Brafitec (engineering exchanges with France), private scholarships such as Santander's, or their own funds. A federal programme, Idiomas sem Fronteiras, offered foreign-language courses to prepare students for mobility. Brazilian universities direct their partnerships towards the most prestigious institutions, and their preparation and follow-up of mobile students remain weak, above all for students from low-income families (Stallivieri, 2017).

The two policies overlapped from 2013, when federal universities filled the first places reserved under the Quota Law, to 2017, when CsF ended. From 2016, the governments that followed the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff cut federal university budgets.

3.2 Two universities in the Northeast

The Federal University of Ceará (UFC), in Fortaleza, and the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), in Salvador, are large federal universities in state capitals. Their quota histories differ. UFBA was among the universities that adopted affirmative action before the federal law: under a resolution adopted in July 2004, it reserved 45% of undergraduate places from the 2005 entrance examination (Santos & Queiroz, 2006; Universidade Federal da Bahia, 2004). UFC adopted quotas only under the federal law: it reserved 12.5% of its places in 2013 and the full 50% in 2014, two years ahead of the 2016 legal deadline (Universidade Federal do Ceará, n.d.). Their public identity differs too: at UFBA, quota status is a collective and political identity; at UFC, an individual and technical matter. UFBA's office for affirmative action and student support (Pró-Reitoria de Ações Afirmativas e Assistência Estudantil, PROAE) funded study-abroad grants for *cotistas* from the early years of the university's quota policy until 2017. The two universities thus offer two configurations: one without grants reserved for *cotistas* (UFC), one with such grants until 2017 (UFBA).

Both universities opened campuses in the interior of their states under the federal policy of *interiorização*, and this expansion produced an internal hierarchy. International relations offices, calls and information on mobility remain on the capital-city campuses and leave the interior campuses at the margin: Vitória da Conquista and Camaçari at UFBA; Cariri, Sobral and Quixadá at UFC. UFC's interior campuses also lack language centres (*casas de cultura*). At UFC, units in Fortaleza account for nearly all recorded mobility stays; the three interior campuses, for one in twenty. The disciplinary profile of mobility also differs. At UFC, engineering and technology dominated departures while CsF lasted and remained the leading field afterwards. At UFBA, outbound mobility involves more students in health, law and the humanities, and concentrates on the Iberian Peninsula.

CsF carried the outbound mobility of both universities; its end separated their paths (Table 1). At UFC, departures collapsed after CsF effectively stopped in 2016 and stayed low. At UFBA, they collapsed as well, then partly recovered from 2017 through bilateral partnerships and targeted grants.

Table 1
Outbound mobility at UFC and UFBA, 2014–2019 (number of students)

Year	UFC	UFBA
2014	667	585
2015	402	242
2016	41	60
2017	108	125
2018	47	197
2019	42	161

Source. International relations offices of UFC and UFBA.

3.3 Biographical interviews

The data come from the author's doctoral research. The study compares the two universities. If the same selection appears in both, it is unlikely to stem from local circumstances; where it takes different forms, the comparison shows how.

The author interviewed 39 former undergraduates of UFC (17) and UFBA (22) who had taken part in international academic mobility between 2014 and 2019; the interviews took place in 2023 and 2024. Fifteen had entered through reserved places: two at UFC, thirteen at UFBA. Recruitment combined a call for participation sent by the international relations offices of both universities, messages in student groups on social media, targeted searches on LinkedIn and, at UFC, former students acting as relays. Few people responded. The sample evolved in the field: students admitted without quotas joined for comparison, and interviewing stopped at thematic saturation, when new interviews revealed no new logic of access or exclusion. The fieldwork explains the imbalance between the two universities. At UFBA, interviewees presented themselves as *cotistas* from the outset. At UFC, quota status carried no collective identity, and several interviewees hesitated when asked how they had been admitted; mobile *cotistas* were harder to reach.

The biographical approach follows each trajectory from family and school background to university entry, the decision to apply, funding, the stay abroad and the return. It captures what questionnaires on the intention to study abroad leave out: how students heard of a call, weighed its cost and decided to apply. The semi-structured guide, pre-tested with Brazilian exchange students and a doctoral student, had three blocks (family situation, educational path, mobility experience) and closed with two open questions. Interviews lasted about an hour on average and took place in Portuguese, in person or remotely. With the participants' consent, the author recorded the interviews, transcribed them with speech-recognition software (Whisper), translated them into French with DeepL, corrected them manually and coded them thematically in MAXQDA with a grid developed during fieldwork. All names are pseudonyms. The author, a white European researcher based outside Brazil, kept a reflexive journal on how this external position could bias interpretation, for instance by underestimating micro-aggressions or overvaluing institutional factors. Table 2 summarises the corpus.

Table 2
Interviewees by university and admission route

University	Admission route	n	Public secondary school	No parent with a higher education degree	STEM fields	Main funding	Main destinations
UFBA	Quota (*cotista*)	13	13	10	5	PROAE (8), CsF (3)	Portugal (9)
UFBA	General admission	9	0	3	3	CsF (4), Santander (3)	Portugal (2), Spain (2)
UFC	Quota (*cotista*)	2	2	2	2	Brafitec (1), CsF (1)	France (1), United States (1)
UFC	General admission	15	5	7	12	CsF (8), Brafitec (2), Santander (2)	Australia (4), France (3)
Total		39	20	22	22		

Note. Public secondary schools include military public schools. STEM fields: engineering, architecture, computer science, animal science, pharmacy and veterinary medicine. Source: interviews, 2023–2024.

3.4 Institutional interviews and records

Institutional interviews comprise four with the international relations offices (two at UFC's Pró-Reitoria de Relações Internacionais, PROINTER, and two at UFBA's Assessoria para Assuntos Internacionais), seven with PROAE, and two with the coordinators of the language programmes, one per university. UFC's student affairs office did not respond to requests. These interviews show how offices issue calls, how information reaches students, and how UFBA allocated, then withdrew, funding for *cotistas*.

Anonymised records of outbound mobility for 2014–2019 situate the interviews. The UFC record, an extract from the university's student information system, lists 1,215 departures with the degree programme, type of secondary school and mobility programme of each. For 2015–2019, the extract records fewer departures than the international relations office; its percentages describe recorded departures only. The UFBA record lists the 713 departures outside CsF, with their destinations. The UFC extract records admission route only for students admitted in 2017: the records describe who left, not how many *cotistas* were among earlier entrants. Neither university's records yield application rates: UFBA records only accepted applications, and UFC's data do not link departures to quota status. The share of former private-school students among all UFC undergraduates in 2014–2019 was not available. For cohorts admitted from 2014, however, the Quota Law sets a floor: public-school graduates held at least half of their places. Comparing this floor with the composition of their recorded departures gives a lower-bound measure of under-representation. Because these cohorts left in 2015–2019, the years the extract covers incompletely, the direction of any bias is unknown.

3.5 Who leaves

Former private-school students dominate UFC's recorded departures, CsF departures most of all (Table 3). The legal floor shows the scale of this dominance: from 2014, public-school graduates held at least half of UFC's undergraduate places but accounted for about a quarter of the recorded departures from these cohorts.

Table 3
Recorded departures at UFC by type of secondary school attended

Departures	n	Former private-school students	Former public-school students
All departures, 2014–2019	1,215	1,040 (85.6%)	171 (14.1%)
Departures in 2014	667	588 (88.2%)	77 (11.5%)
CsF departures	991	863 (87.1%)	125 (12.6%)
Students admitted in 2014–2016	128	94 (73.4%)	34 (26.6%)

Note. Rows do not sum to n where the type of school is not recorded (four departures in total). The extract is incomplete for 2015–2019 (see Section 3.4). Source: UFC student information system extract.

The records give admission route only for the 2017 entrants. Seventeen of them went abroad; of the fifteen whose route is recorded, eleven were *cotistas*. All eleven left in March 2017 on Juventude sem Fronteiras, a four-month programme in language schools (ELS and Enforex, according to the records), with no host university recorded. None left on an academic exchange, a CsF scholarship or a double degree. In this cohort, public-school graduates made up just over half of the departures, but all of them left on these language-school stays.

The interview corpus shows the same selection from another angle. All fifteen *cotistas* attended public secondary schools. Thirteen self-declared as *preto* or *pardo*, against four of the 24 other interviewees; twelve had no parent with a higher education degree, against ten of the 24 (Table 2). On a small corpus, this homogeneity is not a statistical measure; it shows the selection already made upstream, at the first threshold.

3.6 Scope and limits

The study analyses how selection operates among students who crossed the threshold. With no group of non-mobile *cotistas*, it cannot isolate the weight of any single factor in the decision to leave. Its findings rest on the convergence of student narratives, institutional accounts and records, not on statistical representativeness.

Interview transcripts were translated from Portuguese with DeepL and corrected manually. A large language model (Claude, Anthropic) assisted in preparing the English text. The author reviewed and revised all content and takes full responsibility for it.

4. Findings: the three levels of the second threshold

4.1 Resources and the criteria that convert them

The cost of the stay. Where no grant covers the stay, ability to pay selects candidates before anyone reads their academic records. Staff in both universities described this barrier. At UFBA, the coordinator of the international relations office stated it plainly: "it is the students who have the financial means to pay for the whole structure — housing, food, ticket, health insurance — who go on exchange." At UFC, the coordinator of PROINTER explained that students do not apply "because of the financial dimension."

None of the fifteen *cotistas* interviewed left without institutional aid: PROAE funded eight, a programme scholarship six, a tuition waiver the last. Priscila (UFBA), by contrast, financed her semester in Salamanca with family money alone and never had to apply for aid. She named her advantage herself: "I came from a reality that allowed me to get in without quotas." Among *cotistas*, inherited economic and cultural capital and institutional financial support separate students: with the same quota status, discipline and university, a student whose father holds two degrees and lived ten years in Italy does not meet the obstacles of a student who is the first in her family at university. Rafael (UFC), admitted without quotas and refused at his first application, sold cakes to fund his departure: "I could not have left Brazil if I had not sold cakes." UFC had no selection procedure for the programme he joined and never contacted him during his three years abroad. Without institutional aid or family money, departure depends on what students can raise themselves.

UFBA protected its *cotistas* from this barrier until 2017, when federal budget cuts led it to withdraw the grants reserved for them. Mobility became a paid option, and the barrier that dominated at UFC reached UFBA.

Direct costs are not the only costs. Fourteen of the 39 interviewees named opportunity cost, the income lost while abroad, rather than direct cost as the main obstacle to mobility. Scholarships cover living expenses, not lost income. For students who cannot bear this cost, not applying is a

lucid calculation, not an academic failure: the self-elimination that Boudon (1973) described, observed at the moment of decision.

Grades. Where funding removes the cost barrier, the selection criterion takes over. According to the coordinator of UFBA's international relations office, because PROAE financed *cotistas*, the grade point average decided selection. She defended it as transparent and fair and refused any social weighting ("I cannot shout out everyone's story"), citing her own experience as a student who had worked while studying. Grades are themselves a product of inequality: a student who works during the day obtains lower results for lack of time, not of ability. Bruna (UFBA) criticised selection criteria that concentrate competition on grades and so exclude "many people," above all "people who work." By refusing any weighting, the procedure converts a class inequality into an academic deficit. The cost of the stay decided at UFC, the grade point average at UFBA; language certification and distance from the capital campuses weighed in both.

Language certification. Paid certification gives foreign-language proficiency a price. Calls require a certificate, typically at B2 level, and candidates pay for the test. The PROINTER coordinator at UFC contrasted the candidate who "arrives with a B2 certificate" with the one who "arrives with only what he learned in secondary school." The coordinator of UFC's language programme noted that former private-school students are often bilingual from primary school. The *cotistas* interviewed left with weaker command of foreign languages. Nádia, a UFC *cotista* and the only *cotista* among the Brazilian students at a French engineering school, measured the gap against her compatriots: "those from the Southeast and the South seemed to come from wealthier families and had better English. I didn't have those opportunities." She reads the gap in terms of individual capital.

UFBA's language programme, created in 2012 to prepare students for CsF, offers free foreign-language courses. Since 2017, its selection calls have given priority to black, *quilombola* and socioeconomically vulnerable students (Pereira, 2021). Its capacity has followed the university budget: the number of students selected fell by more than half between the second half of 2014 and the first half of 2015, and fell again with the budget restrictions of 2019 (Pereira, 2021). Among those selected, the students in the most precarious financial situations drop out for material reasons: work, transport, childcare. Its coordinator summed up: "It is not the expression of a lack of interest, but rather of a lack of social conditions." The programme now runs with two administrative staff for more than 1,600 students. At UFC, Idiomas sem Fronteiras allocates places on a first-come, first-served basis and reserves none for *cotistas*. Its coordinator observed that programmes with many *cotistas*, such as languages and the humanities, recruit students with weaker foreign-language skills, while engineering, health and the sciences concentrate former private-school students. The institutions have identified the problem; they lack the means to address it.

Information. Information on calls travels through channels that rarely reach first-generation students or the interior campuses. Calls circulate by institutional email, among other channels, and information circulates outside *cotista* networks. Rodrigo (UFBA, law) observed that "not many *cotistas* applied, because they did not know, they were unaware of this possibility." He described his own path as that of a first-generation student without guidance: "I was the one who opened the doors for the family. Along the way I felt a bit alone; I did not have the luck of having someone to advise me." Samuel (UFBA) described another distance: "I was told that not everyone reads their emails. If it is self-censorship, it is because there is already too much to do and the priority is to stay at university." He also noted the absence of any targeted outreach: "I don't think there is a campaign for the most vulnerable."

The interior campuses, where students come on average from lower-income households, stand furthest from these channels (Section 3.2). The PROINTER coordinator acknowledged the effect: applicants are "mostly students from Fortaleza; those from the interior end up not getting involved, partly because financially they are students with somewhat fewer resources." Access to university has been decentralised; the information that governs access to mobility has not.

Field of study. When public programmes target fields of study, discipline decides who is exposed to mobility. In the interview corpus, CsF funded thirteen of the 22 STEM students and three of the 17 others. Brafitec sent only engineering students. The six Santander scholars all came from outside STEM, where no public programme targeted them. Outside STEM, students depended on private scholarships and, at UFBA until 2017, on PROAE grants, such as the one with which Caio, a law student, left (Section 4.2). In Germany, support for mobility reinforced selectivity through an economic channel (Netz & Finger, 2016); in Brazil, the targeting of disciplines produced a comparable selection through another channel: the programme, not income, selected. Inequality did not shrink; it moved along the student's path (Erlich et al., 2021; Lörz et al., 2016).

4.2 Dispositions: the relation to legitimacy

The sense of illegitimacy is not only an inner disposition; it responds to a way of sorting students by language, money and grades. Daiane (UFBA) described how she ruled out the most contested degree programmes: "there were much more contested programmes, where I thought I would not make it, so I did not try." She internalised the verdict of selection before it was pronounced. Rodrigo (UFBA), the first in his family at university, described the effort of proving himself among better-endowed peers: "I felt I had to study more, to make more effort to try to equal them." This effort is a cost that students whose parents hold degrees do not bear. Cicalo (2012) documented comparable encounters of race and class among students admitted through affirmative action at another Brazilian public university. PROAE reported that it had "never had students come to raise" their personal difficulties: the student who anticipates illegitimacy meets an institution whose silence confirms it.

All the interviewees left; their accounts show the cleft habitus in earlier choices (Daiane) and in the cost of proving themselves (Rodrigo). Among first-generation students who do not apply, not applying reads as self-elimination in Boudon's sense, and the sense of illegitimacy as the effect of a cleft habitus, which can lead them to withdraw before they are refused.

Dispositions also change through peers. *Cotistas* build horizontal networks of transmission, and mobility passes from one cohort to the next. Vinícius (UFBA) called himself a "later edition" of Caio, a *pardo* law student admitted through quotas who had left for Portugal in 2015: "Caio went first; when he came back, I went." Edson, a *cotista* who went to Germany, told how Caio arrived in Portugal speaking no foreign language and learned English, French and Spanish there, thanks to the PROAE grant. At UFC, Rafael cited a black friend in animal science who went to Australia and stayed until his doctorate. Caio's stay depended on a PROAE grant, the type of aid that UFBA discontinued in 2017.

4.3 The hierarchy of destinations

Coloniality, in Quijano's (2000) sense, structures the geography of mobility. At UFBA, nine in ten of the 713 departures outside CsF went to Europe; fewer than one in twenty, to Latin America. Portugal alone received a third, Spain a quarter. South–South cooperation remained marginal. The hierarchy also runs inside the North. Portugal, the former colonial power, which has drawn on its colonial ties to attract international students (França et al., 2018; Ploner & Nada, 2020), holds a subordinate position among the centres that Brazilian students aim for, and it is the European destination most accessible to students without English certification.

The price of certification channels students towards this lower tier. Among the destinations open to the interviewees, only Portugal required no paid language certificate. Helena (UFBA) chose it to avoid this cost: "I didn't want to go through that procedure because it would cost money." She adds: "I didn't speak English at the time, that is why I went to Portugal." The interviews give three reasons for choosing Portugal: the language constraint, the avoided cost of certification, and disciplinary reputation, as with Coimbra in law. Nine of the thirteen UFBA *cotistas* went there.

The hierarchy also orders the form of the stay. At UFC, the few *cotistas* visible in the records left on four-month language-school stays, not on academic exchanges (Section 3.5). The second threshold thus sorts students on both of Lucas's (2001) dimensions: whether they go abroad, and how.

5. Discussion

The second threshold adds three elements to research on the social selectivity of study abroad. First, it observes the act of leaving, where the model of Lörz et al. (2016) measures the intention to leave. Second, it restores the role of public policies: quotas ease entry without neutralising the filters that operate downstream. Third, it integrates the racial and colonial stratification (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2001) that weighs on the benefit that *preto*, *pardo* and Indigenous students anticipate and on their relation to legitimacy.

The findings also show how the displacement of inequality towards later stages of higher education (Raftery & Hout, 1993; Duru-Bellat & Kieffer, 2008) operates at study abroad. Where Dias Lopes (2020) shows, with national data, who took part in CsF, the findings show the institutional sequence that produced this result: the cost of the stay, the price of a certificate and the channels of information, then grades and field of study. They also qualify the expectation that the *cotistas* who manage to leave would be the best-endowed. The dividing line does not run between affluent and low-income backgrounds; it shifts within the latter, where inherited economic and cultural capital and institutional financial support separate students. In this corpus, the institutional framework weighs more than individual effort.

The findings yield a proposition for comparative research: a second threshold should appear wherever access to university is corrected at entry while study abroad is funded and selected on criteria identical for all. The process described here, in which ethnoracial categories govern access and produce visibility or absence depending on scale, is not specific to Brazil. Research on Belize shows a neighbouring configuration, in which racial mixing and administrative naming redistribute access to resources (Cunin & Hoffmann, 2011). Comparing the second threshold in the Northeast with such Latin American settings would separate what belongs to Brazil's racial formation from a broader Latin American logic of categorisation.

Dubet's (2010) distinction describes the selection at the second threshold. The Quota Law acknowledges that real equality sometimes requires differentiated rules to compensate for history. Mobility programmes, by contrast, apply a meritocratic equality of opportunities: their criteria, formally identical for all (grades, language, project), favour students whose economic, cultural and relational resources are already the highest. The principles of responsible internationalisation proposed by Stallivieri and Vianna (2020) remain largely within this framework: they call for correcting inequalities of access at the margins, and rarely question the meritocratic criteria that structure selection.

These criteria result from decisions. The withdrawal of *cotista* grants in 2017 and the understaffing of language programmes stem from budgetary choices, not natural constraints. The withdrawal of the grants matches the fourth tenet of maximally maintained inequality: when public support for a transition declines, the effect of social background on that transition grows (Raftery & Hout, 1993; Lucas, 2001, p. 1647). Exclusion is decided, and it can be undone. Dias Lopes (2020) recommended social and racial quotas in mobility programmes; UFBA's grants

reserved for *cotistas* put this recommendation into practice until 2017. Stein and McCartney (2021) name the choice: aiming at global equity, or treating mobility as marketable capital. Brazil has known both, and the shift of 2017 shows which prevailed.

The same logic of centre and periphery operates at three nested scales. Nationally, the ranking of candidates by their scores in the national secondary school examination steers the best-ranked towards the universities of the Southeast (Machado & Szerman, 2021; Neves & Martins, 2017). Regionally, calls and information remain on the capital campuses. Internationally, the languages, partnerships and destinations of peripheral institutions turn towards the North (Marginson & Xu, 2023), and the second threshold reproduces abroad a hierarchy that already structures national space. At each scale, a centre sets the value, and social selection presents itself as a ranking by merit.

The institutions do not read race in their mobility data. UFBA records its mobile students without their quota status, and the UFC extract records admission route only from the 2017 cohort. This statistical blindness adds, in figures, to the invisibility of *cotistas* at the threshold of departure.

The study has limits. It covers two federal universities of the Northeast, with a qualitative method and no aim of statistical representativeness. The associations reported, established on 39 cases, indicate a direction, not a magnitude. The comparison between the two universities is asymmetric: only two UFC interviewees were *cotistas*, so the UFC side of the contrast rests mainly on staff accounts and records. The corpus includes no *cotistas* who did not go abroad: the experience of those who never crossed the threshold, the majority, appears only indirectly, through institutional accounts and the narratives of those who left. The data are cross-sectional and say little about long-term effects. Finally, the categories used (*cotista*, *preto*, *pardo*, self-declared Indigenous) do not describe pre-existing groups. Law, census and procedure produce them as categories of public action, and the census prescribes as much as it describes (Cunin & Hoffmann, 2011). The study therefore examines what institutions do with these categories at each threshold.

6. Conclusion

Affirmative action opened Brazil's federal universities to students from public schools; access to international academic mobility remained reserved for students with the most economic and cultural capital. The second threshold names the selection between admission and departure. Beyond Brazil, the concept offers a way to examine any policy that corrects access at university entry while leaving study abroad to criteria identical for all.

Three results stand out. First, selection precedes academic assessment: in the accounts of students and staff, the cost of the stay, the price of a certificate and unequal access to information sort candidates before anyone compares their academic records; where funding exists, ranking by grades takes over and converts a class inequality into an academic deficit. Second, institutional policy shapes the threshold: the cost of the stay decided at UFC, which reserved no grants for *cotistas*, and the grade point average at UFBA, which did until 2017, while language certification and distance from the capital campuses weighed in both. Third, every *cotista* in the corpus who crossed the threshold relied on institutional financial support, and the withdrawal of dedicated grants at UFBA in 2017 made mobility a paid option.

International academic mobility does not correct social inequalities of access: it defers them to the next threshold and makes them visible. This result depends on political decisions, such as funding grants or not and opening or closing a programme, not on fate. Current indicators measure access to mobility by the number of mobile students and the prestige of their destinations. According to UFBA's international relations office, no student who declared as Indigenous has left on international mobility since 1996; at UFC, the fieldwork identified none: the Indigenous students reached were all enrolled in the intercultural teacher-training degree (Licenciatura Intercultural Indígena), and no interviewee recalled meeting an Indigenous student on campus. A measure of inclusion based on the number of departures cannot see the groups from which no one leaves.

The limits of the study outline the research to come. A study of non-mobile *cotistas*, who give up applying or withdraw during the procedure, would reach the experience that this corpus captures only indirectly. A longitudinal study would measure what mobility brings to the least advantaged over time. South–South cooperation, almost absent from the flows, deserves its own examination. Finally, the 2023 revision of the Quota Law (Brazil, 2023), adopted after the fieldwork, lowered the income threshold and included *quilombola* students. It remains to be established whether the revision will bring support for international mobility.

Declarations

Competing interests:

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics approval:

No ethics committee review was sought for this study, and it was not registered with a data protection officer. Participation was voluntary: interviewees responded to a call for participation, were informed of the aims of the research, and agreed to the recording of their interviews.

Consent to participate:

All participants took part voluntarily and agreed to the recording of their interviews.

Consent for publication:

All names are pseudonyms, and details that could identify participants have been removed.

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No funding was received for conducting this study.

Author contribution:

The author is the sole contributor to the conception, data collection, analysis and writing of this article.

Data availability:

Interview transcripts are not publicly available in order to protect participants' anonymity. The institutional records were supplied by the universities under conditions of anonymity.

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