



## ARTICLE

# Development of Cooperation in Higher Education in BRICS Countries

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### ABSTRACT

As an important component of BRICS cooperation, collaboration in higher education plays a key role in the development and mutual collaboration of the five countries. The purpose of this article is to analyze current cooperation in higher education of BRICS countries. The article selects BRICS Network University, BRICS Universities League and BRICS Summer Program of Fudan University as case studies, to compare and summarize the achievements and the existing problems of these three BRICS higher education projects. The paper discovers that the BRICS education cooperation has great significance to the development of the five countries, and also promotes education in Global South. However, cooperation in higher education is still in its nascent stage and certain aspects need to be improved. At the end, the article gives several suggestions on how to promote and strengthen the cooperation in the future.

### KEYWORDS

Higher education, cooperation, development, BRICS, Global South

## Introduction

The BRICS countries are the most dynamic emerging economies in the world, with a total population of more than 3 billion. Nowadays, the influence of BRICS in the global political, economic, cultural and diplomatic fields is constantly increasing. As collaboration has continued to deepen among BRICS countries and the cooperation in economic and cultural exchanges have risen to a new historical height, this has brought about unprecedented opportunities for the further development of cooperation in higher education.

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With the annual BRICS Education Ministers' Meeting, it can be seen that the BRICS countries attach great importance to collaboration in higher education. The cooperation within BRICS has attained certain achievements. Two official cooperation mechanisms, the BRICS Network University and BRICS Universities League, have been established and there are also bilateral and multilateral education cooperation projects, such as the BRICS Summer Program in Fudan University. These are remarkable results and these projects play a positive role in improving BRICS cooperation. In addition, with economic globalization, emerging economies have become more tightly connected than ever before. Given that BRICS countries are influential developing countries, education cooperation within BRICS would play a significant role in promoting higher education development in the Global South.

The purpose of this article is to study the collaboration in higher education of BRICS countries, to find the existing difficulties and problems in current cooperation. Thus, to give several suggestions in deepen BRICS's cooperation in higher education field. In order to demonstrate this argument, this paper is divided into four sections. The first section presents the importance of the collaboration in BRICS. While benefitting higher education development and cultivation of talents in each country, such collaboration can also promote educational cooperation in Global South. The second section demonstrates an overview of the present collaboration projects and has selected the BRICS Network University, the BRICS Universities League and the BRICS Summer Program as examples. The third section seeks to compare and analyze the achievements and the difficulties in the cooperation at present. Lastly, several suggestions will be given on how to improve and promote collaboration in higher education in the future.

### **The Importance of the Collaboration in Higher Education in BRICS**

In the context of globalization, cooperation in education plays a special function of promoting cultural exchange, economic development and information exchange. Since 2009, when the first BRICS Leaders' Summit put forward the aim "Strengthen Educational Cooperation", collaboration in the field of education has been one of the key priorities in BRICS cooperation. The educational collaboration between the five countries will not only provide high-quality talents for the development of countries, but also have a positive impact on the development in higher education in the Global South.

#### ***Promote Educational Development in BRICS Countries***

Since the establishment of the BRICS cooperation mechanism, the five countries have always adhered to the spirit of "cooperation, development, and mutual benefit". The collaboration in higher education in BRICS could promote positive educational development in these countries.

At present, educational development in the BRICS countries can be characterized by its "large scale" and "fast development". The BRICS countries have encountered common challenges in promoting educational equity, increasing

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education opportunities and improving the quality of education. Through the platform built by the BRICS Education Cooperation, the five countries can learn from each other and explore solutions in these areas. In addition, the BRICS countries have complementary aspects in the field of education, and the development of education in each country could be promoted through cooperation and exchange among the five countries. When higher education in one country accepts and adopts ideas, curriculum, languages, cultures, traditions and even talent training from other countries' education systems, the collaboration between education systems leads to amplified results and guaranteed intelligence, and forms the basis for long-term and stable cooperation. Through practical cooperation, the BRICS countries will strengthen the relations between the universities, share their experiences in development of first-class disciplines and cooperation in scientific research, as well as jointly explore new ideas in university reforms, share new experiences, promote the development of education within the BRICS countries, and work together to promote world-class universities construction.

### ***Cultivate Talents for the Cooperation between BRICS Countries***

The BRICS Education Cooperation Mechanism offers a communication platform to encourage more outstanding youths and scholars to pay more attention to and participate in the development of BRICS cooperation. Cooperation in higher education has successfully cultivated many outstanding talents for the BRICS countries.

Regardless of whether it is in the field of cultural exchange and economic development, or in technological innovation and emerging technology, the future of BRICS cooperation will be conducted mainly by the younger generation, who should explore new ideas, new methods and new solutions for BRICS countries. Under the impetus of the BRICS Education Ministers' Meeting, the five countries have continuously promoted joint research and training of talents, as well as increased the number of teachers and students involved in academic exchange programs. The international platform of BRICS cooperation has allowed students from the five countries to gain broadened perspectives, increased knowledge as well as enhanced competence in global communication. This has in turn produced high-quality compound talents for the economic development and technological innovation of the BRICS countries.

In addition, the cooperation of BRICS in education produces impacts beyond just the field of education. The BRICS countries are geographically far apart, spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. The BRICS countries have also had very different historical development paths, as well as tremendous differences in languages and cultures. As the Chinese saying goes, "The key to sound relations between states lies in the affinity between their people, which largely stems from mutual understanding". Through the exchanges and cooperation in higher education, youths in the five countries will gain greater understanding of the culture and context of each country's development, and thus truly enhance the affinity between the people from different BRICS countries.

It can be said that the BRICS higher education cooperation is not only an important part of the BRICS cooperation but also reflects the achievements of the

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cooperation. Therefore, enhancing cooperation in higher education is conducive to deepening the cooperation of BRICS in other fields.

### ***Boost Development of Education in Global South***

As the representatives of emerging economies and developing countries, the rise of BRICS has become a new development force in the world. Among the BRICS members, China, South Africa, India, and Brazil are all major countries of the Global South, and Russia also promotes international cooperation in accordance to the principles of South-South cooperation. It can be said that cooperation between Global South and BRICS countries are all based on the prospect of common development of developing countries, with the goal of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation. BRICS higher education cooperation also opens up new paths and provides new ideas for education development in the Global South.

In the field of education, the Global South countries and BRICS countries now face many common difficulties and problems such as ensuring equality in opportunities for higher education, eliminating gender inequality, caring for vulnerable groups and improving the quality of education. BRICS higher education cooperation is in line with the UNESCO Education 2030 Action Framework. Under this framework, efforts are made to promote the sustainable development of education, actively contribute the “BRICS Solution” to the world, enhance the influence and increase the benefit of BRICS higher education cooperation, create an open and diverse partnership network in educational development, increase accessibility for more developing countries to take the “fast train” and “free ride” of BRICS education development, and lead and promote the development of quality fair education around the world.

### **Present International Cooperation in Higher Education in BRICS**

With the positive response and support of the BRICS Education Ministers’ meeting, the five countries constantly work together to promote pragmatic cooperation and have already signed a series of declarations for bilateral and multilateral cooperation. This chapter provides a brief overview of the present cooperation projects in the five countries. Among them, all five countries have jointly participated in the BRICS Network University and BRICS Universities League, and these two projects are recognized and supported by the Ministers of Education of each country. In addition, the BRICS Summer Program is an exchange program for college students from BRICS countries, funded by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission and organized by Fudan University.

#### ***BRICS Network University***

The BRICS Network University is a major mechanism for multilateral cooperation in higher education in the BRICS countries. It is led by Russia and the secretariat is located in Ural Federal University. The mechanism was established for joint research and training of highly qualified professionals in universities in the BRICS countries, thereby making higher education play its increasingly important role in national strategic decision-making and the development of emerging economies. The thematic

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priorities of the BRICS Network University include Energy, Computer Science and Information Security, BRICS studies, Ecology, Climate Change, Water Resources and Pollution Treatment, and Economics.

At present, there are 55 universities in the BRICS countries participating in the BRICS Network University project, with 11 universities from each country. Other than top universities from the five countries – for example, Lomonosov Moscow State University and St. Petersburg State University in Russia, Fudan University and Zhejiang University in China, University of the Witwatersrand and University of Cape Town in South Africa, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and the University of Delhi in India – there are also specialized colleges with corresponding dominant disciplines accepted by the Network, including Indian Institutes of Technology, Hohai University (for hydraulic engineering), Durban University of Technology, and ITMO University, etc.

### ***BRICS Universities League***

The BRICS University League was first proposed by the Center of BRICS Studies of Fudan University when it was established in March 2012. The aim of the League is to become a platform for academic and expert cooperation, comparative research, and international educational projects, so as to provide intellectual support for BRICS cooperation and develop a new way of university internationalization. After the idea was put forward, it was immediately supported by the Russian National Research University Higher School of Economics, and the two sides set up a working group to promote its establishment.

On October 18, 2015, the BRICS University League was established in Beijing Normal University, China, and the Beijing Consensus was declared. According to the Beijing Consensus, members of the BRICS University League will work together to build a platform for collaborative research and academic exchanges, strive to enhance global knowledge innovation, improve people's living standards, and consolidate and enhance the influence of BRICS in global intellectual competition. The League will also pay attention to the all-rounded development of young students and cultivate innovative talents with an international vision. The League advocates a balanced and sustainable development model to achieve the harmony between economic development and environmental protection, and urges BRICS countries to choose a development strategy that suits their national circumstances.

At the same time, under the cooperation mechanism of the BRICS University League, the five countries will strengthen the cooperation in personnel training, carry out inter-university teacher exchanges and student exchanges, mutual recognition of credits and mutual degree conferring among BRICS countries, and implement the training of talents for undergraduate, master, doctor and postdoctoral students. Secondly, they will strengthen research cooperation, conduct bilateral or multilateral scientific research cooperation, set up joint laboratories and bases, jointly carry out scientific innovation research, establish bilateral or multilateral research think tanks, and jointly tackle major issues concerning BRICS cooperation, provide policy consultation for the economic and social development of all countries. Thirdly, they will

also strengthen cooperation on quality assurance of higher education and explore the joint development of the high education quality assurance system in BRICS countries. These three aspects serve as the core aims and objectives for cooperation.

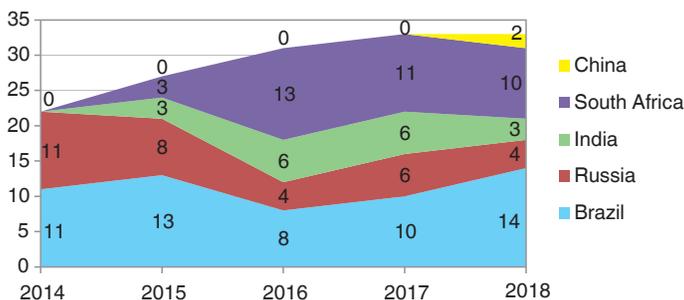
### **BRICS Summer Program of Fudan University**

The BRICS Summer School Program is the first program in BRICS education cooperation and has the largest substantial progress. The summer school focuses on communication and integration, aiming to create a platform for consensus and friendship among young students from the BRICS countries. The program aims to facilitate mutual exchanges and consolidate BRICS cooperation, promote the understanding and interest of the younger generation in China's social culture, political and economic development, as well as in BRICS collaboration and the change in global governance.

The Summer School was first established in 2014 and has since been successfully held for five years. Every year during July and August, the summer school gathers both undergraduate and graduate students from top universities of BRICS countries for a one-month study in Fudan University, one of the most prestigious universities in China. The BRICS Summer School enrolls 28 students every year from both partner and nonpartner schools of Fudan University, amongst which 20 students are eligible for full scholarships. Depending on the registration status, the number of scholarships are equally divided among the four countries.

Since its establishment in 2014, a total of 145 outstanding students have participated in the BRICS Summer School Program. Figure 1 illustrates that among the 145 students, there have been 56 Brazilian students, 34 Russian students, 18 Indian students, and 37 South African students. This year's program was the first time that two additional Chinese students were allowed to enroll in the program. Most of the students were undergraduate and postgraduates students, with a small number of doctoral student and young researchers.

The Summer Course consists of two modules: "Global Governance and Cooperation among BRICS" and "China's Politics and Diplomacy". The Summer School also organizes other BRICS-related activities and events, such as participation



**Figure 1.** 2014–2018 The Number of the Student from Each Country

*Source:* Center for BRICS Studies of Fudan University.

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in the BRICS Annual Meeting, visit to the New Development Bank and simulation of the BRICS Summit. Other than regular lectures, the program also includes several cultural excursions within and around Shanghai, so as to let students get in touch with the Chinese traditional culture. To guarantee the quality of teaching, all lectures are English-taught and are delivered by prestigious scholars from China, the United States, Brazil, South Africa, and other countries and regions. Many of the lecturers are senior researchers in BRICS studies, and the program has also invited famous diplomats and entrepreneurs to give the lecture for the students.

### **The Achievements and Difficulties in the Cooperation in Higher Education**

Through an overview of the three case studies above, this section compares and analyzes the achievements of the current cooperation projects. This section will also summarize the difficulties and problems encountered in the concrete implementation of the cooperation projects.

#### ***Achievements in the BRICS Education Cooperation***

Driven by the BRICS Network University, the BRICS Network University Conference has been successfully held for three years. In 2016, at Ural Federal University, Russia, representatives held their first plenary meeting. During the meeting, the official logo and slogan of the Network University were adopted and the International Governing Board (IGB) draft regulations and other regulations were discussed. In 2017 and 2018, the annual meeting of the BRICS Network University was held in Zhengzhou, Henan, China and Cape Town, South Africa. The two meetings focused on topics such as centered on “Pragmatic Cooperation and International Education”, “Sustainable Development Strategy of Network University”, “Formulate and Consolidate BRICS Education Agenda”, etc.

Achievements have also been made in the implementation of cooperation projects. One of the key priority areas of the BRICS Network University is international joint education, especially the promotion of student exchanges and joint training in the field of superior disciplines. In the context of the BRICS Network University, Ural Federal University and the North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power (NCWU) have established a Sino-Russian cooperative school – Ural Institute of NCWU by, approved by the Ministry of Education of China. In line with the unique advantages and features of these two universities, four majors were set up: Water Supply and Drainage Science and Engineering, Energy and Power Engineering, Geomatics Engineering, and Architecture. The two universities plan to recruit 60 new students in 2018. Students who meet the graduation requirements of the two universities can obtain their Bachelor’s Degree from NCWU as well as the degree certificates in related majors of Ural Federal University.

The BRICS Summer Program of Fudan University, as a successful example of recent cooperation, has also successfully forged closer educational bonds among the young people of five countries. So far, the program had gained media attention and has earned praises from the officials of Consulate-Generals of BRICS countries.

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The BRICS Summer Program has enhanced the interests and ignited enthusiasm of the young generation to find out more about China. Many students reflected that the one-month program had broadened their horizons and that they had gained more insights and perspectives in BRICS Studies. After participating in the summer program, some of the students have decided to further their studies in China and have gone on to apply for the Master's Degree courses. Furthermore, with the experience from the summer school, some students have contributed their own efforts to promote the cooperation of the BRICS countries. For example, three Brazilian students from the 2016 BRICS Summer Program organized the "China and Brazil: Challenges in 2017 Forum" at Peking University in 2017, which helped to promote the communication between the Chinese and Brazilian organizations and enterprises. Another student from South Africa was selected as the youth representative to coordinate BRICS affairs between China and South Africa.

In contrast, although the BRICS University League has been mentioned many times in the Meeting of BRICS Education Ministers and has gathered 55 top universities from five countries, there has been a lack of substantive progress and concrete cooperation projects. There is a lack of interaction and communication between member universities and the League. For now, the League has not played a significant role in promoting higher education in the BRICS countries.

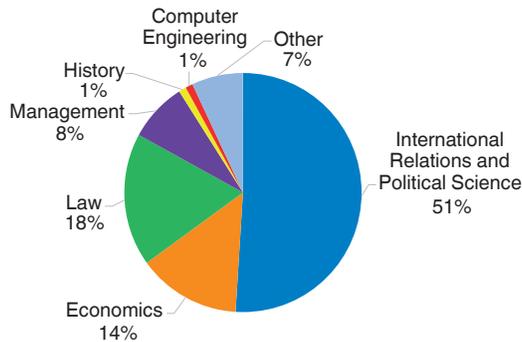
### ***Difficulties in the Current Educational Cooperation***

Through the above review, it can be seen that the cooperation between the BRICS countries in the field of higher education area has attained certain achievements. However, at the same time, it has also showed that there are several aspects that need to be improved in the present cooperation.

### **Lack of Multilateral Cooperation**

At present, the BRICS Network University focuses on cooperation in Energy, Computer Science and Information Security, BRICS studies, Ecology, Climate Change, Water Resources and Pollution Treatment, and Economics. Most of the member universities within the network are known for Science and Engineering disciplines. With regards to the BRICS Summer Program of Fudan University, according to the curriculum, the courses are mainly about "Global Governance and BRICS cooperation" and "China's Politics and Diplomacy", showing an emphasis on International Relations.

According to the Center for BRICS Studies of Fudan University, on the basis of the data statistics of the professional background of the 145 students participated in former years, from 2014 to 2018, more than 50% of the students were International Relations majors. This was followed by Law (18%) and Economics (14%) respectively. There were very few students studying History, Management, and Asian Studies. From the above data, the current cooperation in higher education of BRICS is principally in International Relations, Economics Management, and Science and Technology. However, there are few exchange and cooperation programs in Agriculture, Technical Skills and Humanities.



**Figure 2.** 2017–2018 Students’ Professional Background

*Source:* Center for BRICS Studies of Fudan University.

### Shortage of Cooperation Funds

Compared with the students from developed countries, the economic conditions of students in BRICS countries are generally worse. When youths are participating in the exchange programs or activities between BRICS countries, a large cost may be incurred due to high cost of tuition, airfare, accommodation, and other fees.

Take the BRICS Summer Program of Fudan University as an example. At present, this project is mainly supported by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission. However, the program funding is only sufficient to support the expenses for the one-month operation of the summer school, and the scholarships for some, but not all, of the students. There were some cases where the student gave up on participating in the summer school because they did not manage to get the scholarship. Thus, it can be seen that in the absence of subsidies or scholarships, the high economic cost of these educational programs may reduce the enthusiasm of interested students, hence depriving those interested in BRICS development of such education opportunities.

### Lack of Publicity

The BRICS Network University established its official website (<https://nu-brics.ru>) in 2016. Relevant information and documents, such as on the BRICS Network University, such as the university charter, organizational structure, list of member universities, as well as BRICS News and BRICS Announcements, which focus on BRICS education development, the Annual Conference of the Network University and the priority areas of the Network University’s cooperation is available on this website.

The BRICS Summer Program of Fudan University is mainly promoted through the Internet and the recommendations of former program students and professors from partner schools. Every year during the application period, details on Admissions are publicized on the BRICS Information Sharing & Exchanging Platform and Facebook<sup>1</sup> page of the Fudan BRICS Program. However, despite Facebook being one of the most popular social networking sites among youths, the Fudan BRICS Facebook page only

<sup>1</sup> Facebook® and its logo are trademarks of Facebook, Inc., registered in the United States and other countries

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has about 60 followers (<https://www.facebook.com/fudanbricsprogram/>). In addition, most of the reports of the BRICS Summer School are from Chinese media. News coverage of this program in other BRICS media is relatively low.

Until now, the BRICS Universities League has yet to establish an official website. It is extremely urgent and necessary to create a platform for promoting and sharing useful information.

To sum up, it can be seen that the above three BRICS cooperation programs have different levels of publicity. In general, the publicity of BRICS education cooperation is insufficient and must be further strengthened in the future. In addition to the construction and improvement of the official homepage, traditional media and social networks are also important ways to expand publicity.

### **Suggestions on Strengthening Collaborations in Higher Education in BRICS and Global South**

At present, the BRICS countries have attained a series of remarkable achievements in higher education cooperation. In order to improve the diversified educational cooperation mechanism, this paper gives the following suggestions for the future development of BRICS higher education cooperation.

#### ***Enhance Multilateral, Multi-Disciplinary and Multi-Format Cooperation***

Under the BRICS cooperation mechanism, the five countries actively carry out multi-disciplinary and multi-form educational exchanges and cooperation projects with mutual participation and jointly promoted the development of education. The cooperation between the BRICS countries has deepened into the development of all fields of the five countries, and higher education provides the intellectual guarantee for the cooperation. In addition to focusing on educational cooperation at the annual Meeting of BRICS Education Ministers, other ministerial conferences such as the Meeting of BRICS Ministers of Agriculture, the BRICS Science, Technology & Innovation Ministerial Meeting and the Meeting of BRICS Trade Ministers have also mentioned talent-training issue in relevant areas. Therefore, the BRICS countries can broaden the scope of cooperation in education, not only in the fields of International Relations, Economic Management, Scientific and Technological Innovation, but also promote the cultivation and exchange of talents in Agriculture, Technical Skills and Industry. In terms of the format of cooperation, other than the original exchange programs, summer school and short-term exchange programs, BRICS countries can also promote sister relations in universities with specific professional fields and similar talent training goals, carry out joint education, co-build international laboratories and cooperation centers, and promote distance education.

#### ***Strengthen Government Support for Higher Education Cooperation***

First, increase scholarships for BRICS students and funding support for BRICS education cooperation projects. As mentioned before, the economic conditions of students from the BRICS countries are generally poorer, and many students are

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unable to participate in exchange programs because of the expensive fees. In this regard, the five countries can increase the number of scholarships types for students from the BRICS countries and increase the number of beneficiaries for each of these scholarships to allow more outstanding young people who are interested in the development of the BRICS to participate in the exchange projects. In addition, for other educational cooperation projects that are in progress, financial support can be enhanced to expand the influence of cooperation.

Second, in terms of policies, cooperation in the field of education quality certification and evaluation and academic credit certification standards can be promoted. At present, the BRICS countries have carried out many multilateral and bilateral educational exchange programs. However, the five countries have different education systems, and there are certain gaps in the regulations of education quality. Therefore, the development of education cooperation in BRICS countries should focus on improving the education policies of the five countries, strengthening and expanding cooperation in the field of education quality and certification, and accomplishing the system of mutual recognition of academic degrees and exchange of credits.

### ***Deepen Cooperation in Higher Education with Global South***

In the field of education, the Global South countries and BRICS countries now face many common difficulties and problems such as ensuring equality in higher education opportunities, eliminating gender inequality, caring for vulnerable groups and improving the quality of education. BRICS higher education cooperation is in line with the UNESCO Education 2030 Action Framework. Under this framework, efforts are made to promote the sustainable development of education, actively contribute the “BRICS Solution” to the world, enhance the influence and increase the benefit of BRICS higher education cooperation, create an open and diverse partnership network in educational development, increase accessibility for more developing countries to take the “fast train” and “free ride” of BRICS education development, and lead and promote the development of quality fair education around the world. By analyzing the current cooperation situation of BRICS education and summarizing the solutions and cooperation proposals on the same challenges, the valuable practical experience from BRICS cooperation could then be applied to the development of higher education in the Global South.

As influential developing countries in each of their respective continents, the BRICS countries have similarities in global and regional competition. Therefore, the higher educational cooperation of BRICS plays a leading role in the education development of emerging countries. It is suggested that in the future, the development of higher education in the Global South can be promoted by the BRICS' educational cooperation. In the first place, the countries of BRICS and Global South should establish an international synergetic mechanism, and maintain close contact with international organizations, such as UNESCO, to support the development of educational cooperation among these countries. This would utilize international forces to promote and deepen exchanges of higher education between the countries and to form a collaborative mechanism. Secondly, BRICS countries should expand the scope

of the BRICS higher education cooperation to promote the development of education in the Global South. Under the “BRIC+” initiative, educational cooperation projects could also involve universities from the Global South, while concurrently intensifying contact with top universities to improve the quality of the projects. By analyzing the current cooperation situation of BRICS education and summarizing the solutions and cooperation proposals on the same challenges, the valuable practical experiences could be applied to the development of higher education in the Global South.

## Conclusions

Based on the summary of the above report and the 3 case studies on existing BRICS education cooperation, we can arrive at the following conclusions:

It is clear that there are long-term benefits for strengthening BRICS cooperation in education. Not only is education cooperation an important sector for BRICS cooperation, it also reflects the results that BRICS countries have achieved in cooperation. Under the concept of win-win cooperation, strengthening education cooperation will promote both interactions between teachers and students of BRICS countries, as well as the exchange of education ideology. This will promote development of education in each of the five BRICS countries and also aid in the cultivation of talents who are well versed in BRICS issues. Furthermore, as compared to developed countries, BRICS countries and countries in the Global South share many common challenges in education development. As the representative of emerging countries, education cooperation among BRICS countries will also promote educational development in the Global South and provide valuable experiences for other developing countries.

Significant education cooperation between BRICS countries has already been achieved currently due to the support from the BRICS Education Ministers' Meeting. However, there are still many challenges faced in cooperation. In the case of the BRICS Network University, BRICS Universities League and BRICS summer school, which were mentioned in the report, while these 3 modes of cooperation each have achieved varying results in BRICS cooperation, they are still plagued by the problems of lack of multidisciplinary and multilateral exchanges, lack of sufficient financial support and weak publicity. These are thus areas that ought to be addressed and improve in future BRICS cooperation. Therefore, the BRICS counties should deepen cooperation in higher education from various aspects and at the same time, it is also important to increase the collaboration with countries of Global South.

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