Fly down to Rio, then stretch your horizons

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For UK institutions seeking international partners, there is much potential in Brazil outside the three big cities.

Away from the centre: universities outside the ‘golden triangle’ work hard to attract foreign students and researchers.

With only four Brazilian universities in the Times Higher Education BRICS and Emerging Economies Rankings 2014, attractive options for overseas institutions to engage in the country might appear to be limited.

And with three of those universities in São Paulo and one in Rio de Janeiro, the geographical concentration of institutions makes the opportunities seem even narrower.
Universities outside the “golden triangle” of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte – the country’s biggest cities – therefore face a challenge when it comes to internationalisation and attracting overseas partners.

But many are rising to the task with relish as Brazilian universities recognise the barriers that they must overcome to attract more foreign students and researchers.

“There’s a great national feeling that countries don’t see the potential that exists outside the Rio-São Paulo axis,” said Marcelo Mira, director of international relations at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (PUCPR).

PUCPR, founded more than five decades ago, is a private university in Curitiba, Paraná, the neighbouring state to São Paulo in the south of Brazil.

It has recently started discussing partnerships in medical research with the University of Birmingham after a delegation from the UK institution visited the city earlier this year.

Professor Mira, a geneticist who shares research interests with academics at Birmingham, said: “The feeling is that we have to internationalise ourselves from within. English needs to become a more prevalent language than it is today; our teachers, our collaborators need to be more receptive to foreign students who arrive. Our students have to be more prepared to leave the country.

“I hope it will be a fruitful relationship with Birmingham.”

Noting that the university had almost 40 overseas partners, he observed that UK universities were often more rigid in their approach than other European and US counterparts.

**Regional emphasis**

The Federal University of Technology-Paraná – which has campuses across the state – has also developed relationships with Birmingham, as well as with the University of Nottingham. These were based on the study of erosion and corrosion of deep-water oil and gas facilities, and the long-term aim of the partnership is to establish a centre of excellence for research in the field.

Earlier this year, academics from Birmingham – whose work in Brazil won the institution the Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Award for Outstanding International Strategy last month – travelled to Paraná as well as São Paulo and Rio in a visit organised through the British Embassy’s Science and Innovation Network.

Richard Williams, Birmingham’s pro vice-chancellor and head of its College of Engineering and Physical Sciences, said that fostering partnerships outside the major cities was a priority for Brazil’s government.

“As well as developing partnerships in São Paulo and Rio, we focus on collaboration in the northeast and the south,” he said. “We recognised that Paraná, as with many states across Brazil, is prioritising work on energy and is looking at how to tackle the key challenges around, for example, low-carbon technology and policy, energy storage and energy utilisation in transport.”

Professor Williams added that officials would be returning to Paraná to deliver workshops and co-funding applications.

He said that Birmingham had taken steps to expand academic relationships with Brazil by teaching Portuguese to staff and the university had also reached out to the country by getting involved with its Science Without Borders exchange scheme.

Birmingham already works with the top 10 universities in Brazil and 17 of the top 20, including a partnership of more than 25 years with the Federal University of Santa Catarina.

Peter Clack, Birmingham’s director of international relations, said that the university’s successful engagement with the country was the result of building “a community of interest right across the university which has allowed things to move forward quickly”.

From the Brazilian point of view, a similar drive to open the whole academic community’s eyes to working with foreign partners will also be important.

“Brazil is a relatively closed country, [and] I think Brazilian universities reflect this,” said Professor Mira, who stressed that internationalisation was one of the five key areas of his university’s strategic plan for 2020.

“I think there is this movement,” he said. “Brazilian universities need internationalisation, but they also need to work hard within to internationalise themselves.”