

Higher Education in Brazil: Different Worlds and Diverse Beliefs

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Diversity is one of the main traits of Brazilian higher education. The 2011 census (INEP 2013), which is the most recent data available for the entire system, registered a total of 2,565 higher education institutions (HEIs) in metropolitan areas and small towns around the country. Based on the law, all these institutions are entitled to grant bachelor degrees and supposed to provide similar undergraduate instruction. However, the immense differences among them can be found in almost any aspects: Small family-owned isolated schools coexist with huge for-profit universities with shares in the stock market. Likewise, highly competitive public research universities are established next to regional universities that are entirely devoted to undergraduate instruction.

Inside the public sector, university is the most common type of HEI. In the last few years, however, there has been a growth of non-university public institutions. Many vocational public secondary schools were upgraded to higher education and allowed to offer vocational programs at this level. Meanwhile, public universities tend to be large, multi-campus comprehensive institutions. They may be owned by the federal government, state governments, and even municipal authorities. In general, the public sector offers good work conditions for faculty since 81 percent of the academics have full-time permanent contracts.

Higher education in Brazil is not only diverse; it is also marked by strong, though informal, hierarchies. Within the public sector, the main line of division is the institutional commitment to graduate education, in particular, doctoral education (Balbachevsky 2013a). Graduate education is highly concentrated: only a small number of institutions meet the requirements to offer graduate programs,

especially at the doctoral level. Since the 1970s, graduate education in Brazil is organized around disciplinary programs and subject to strong regulation and strict evaluation based on peer review (Castro and Soares 1986). Among the public universities, only a few, 21, according to the most recent data available, have a strong commitment to graduate education. Some of them are owned by the federal government, but others are owned by the states. These public universities have enrollments of, at least, 30 percent at the graduate level (masters and doctoral programs) and also a large proportion of faculty with doctoral degrees. Having graduate education as the main institutionalized site for research, these institutions serve as fully developed research universities (Durhan and Gusso 1991).

On the other hand, all other public universities and institutions (a total of 263 public institutions) are strongly committed to undergraduate education. Within these institutions, graduate education is a smaller enterprise and tends to be limited to the master's level. Even so, institutions play a relevant role as regional sources of skills and knowledge. As thus, I propose to call them public regional institutions, regardless of the ownership (i.e., the federal government or some state or local government).

Private institutions represent more than 88 percent of all institutions and attract 73.7 percent of all enrollments at the undergraduate level. In the private sector, the most common institutional type is the isolated professional school that offers programs in a small number of professional tracks.¹ Most of the private sector is confined to a kind of mass market where the lower price charged for education is the most relevant differential. I label these institutions private mass-oriented institutions. They are open-door institutions catering for older students from poorer families that had no access to good quality education prior to entering higher education. In the last 10 years, this subsector has experienced a strong

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consolidation movement with the growth of huge private universities—some of them with more than five hundred thousand students. As a result, while most private institutions are still small isolated professional schools, there is a small number of large multi-campus private for-profit universities among them. In 2011, the 88 largest private universities had more than 27.5 percent of all undergraduate enrollments in the country (Sampaio 1999).

In the last two decades, the private sector also has experienced a process of stratification with the growth of prestigious, elite private institutions catering to the students from the richer and better-educated families. Some of these institutions are Catholic and other denominational universities, but there are also a number of lay institutions with strong reputation for providing good quality training conformed to the demands posed by the labor market.

Policy Dynamics in Brazilian Higher Education

The dynamics of Brazilian higher education policies are marked by contradictory forces. At the beginning of nineteenth century, higher education was conceived as part of a project to transform this early Portuguese colony into a more modern national state. This transformation was expected to produce a group of professional elites trained to possess the best technical and legal knowledge available. At that time, training was supposed to be conducted in institutions that were controlled by the state and freed from traditional religious thinking. In order to reinforce the utilitarian side of the knowledge cultivated inside higher education, none of the institutions founded in the nineteenth century adopted the university model. Instead, higher education offered updated professional training, thus directing students to specialized professional schools such as the Polytechnic School of Engineering of São Paulo, the Medical School of Salvador, and the Law School of Rio de Janeiro.

In the 1930s, when the first universities were founded, their elite character was reinforced. The establishment of these first universities was supported by a group of new elites with a modernizing project that also

aimed at establishing the basis for the country's industrialization and government reform. The first universities in Brazil were built upon meritocratic access to higher education, high level of professional training, new institutional core devoted to the development of science and humanities, and trained teachers for the secondary level. Access to higher education was regulated through competitive entrance exams. Curriculum was developed under strict supervision of a new powerful education ministry.

The first comprehensive university reform in Brazil was carried out in 1968. The reform replaced the chair system with departments, created specialized institutes for different fields of science, and introduced full-time contracts for faculty. It also reinforced the preexisting ideals of unitary higher education constituted by only public, tuition-free, and research-oriented universities. These ideals have had a lasting impact on the beliefs that guide public decisions on higher education in Brazil (for an overview of 1968 reforms, see Klein 1992).

The 1968 reform was more or less successfully implemented in the public sector. At that time, Brazil also experienced the first massive increase of demand for higher education. In 1960, 95,000 students were enrolled in undergraduate courses. Ten years later, this number grew to 425,000, and to more than one million by 1975. To face this scenario, while preserving the public universities' elite training function, the government allowed private initiatives to create new institutions. The growth of the private sector was achieved as the number of for-profit isolated professional school increased, following the early institutional model of the nineteenth century. Because the 1968 reform had relevantly introduced full-time contracts to the public sector, the new institutions at the private sector searched for faculty mostly among professionals from the general labor market, without any kind of academic training. As a result, private higher education in Brazil was regarded with contempt by most public stakeholders.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the Brazilian society was gradually reshaped by long-lasting forces of both economic and macro-political processes. The former refers to the Brazil's economic crisis in the 1980s and the latter refers to the country's democratiza-

tion process. In general, the economic crisis was overcome by the economic reforms that supported new policy instruments directing higher education to perform a more active role in the country's innovation system. These policies were related with competitiveness, entrepreneurship, and market relevance of academic research. By employing this proactive policy agenda, the federal government applied a new public management approach centered in decisions related to science, technology, and innovation.

The so-called "democratic pact" that provided legitimacy to the new political regime starting in 1984 also encompassed a strong demand for equity and social inclusiveness. Being present across all policy systems, issues related to social inclusiveness, including higher education, have strong legitimacy. Access to higher education has become the private sector's main concern; however, this matter has been a key issue to the public sector as well since early 2000s. The demand for access poses strong challenges to public universities. They are expensive institutions manned by full-time academics with low teaching load and governed through an organization model based on the representative principle. In this model, institutional authorities are elected by students, academics, and non-academic staff and decisions respond mostly to the pressures coming from internal stakeholders. While the representative principle keeps university governance from any external influence and support, the lack of financial autonomy subjects it to direct political pressures coming from the government (Balbachevsky 2013b).

The Brazilian government is currently responding to a new political agenda where access and inclusiveness are top priorities. The agenda is realized by increasing access to higher education and breaking off the meritocratic logic through policies that favor minority and low-income students. In order to accommodate the new agenda, while preserving the early university model inside the public sector, universities are pushed to expand themselves toward mega-universities, following the example of many other Latin American countries. However, if this agenda is applied homogeneously through all institutions in the public sector, it would endanger the prior massive efforts of establishing high

quality graduate education and strong research environment of some universities. Furthermore, internal stakeholders strongly resist the notion of acknowledging differentiation, which creates a lasting impasse in this area.

On the other hand, Brazil's large and ever-growing private sector has posed a challenge for the government, particularly a leftist government committed to the ideals of a universal public tuition-free higher education. To overpower the challenge, both the government and public sector need to curb the growth of the private sector. Thus, the policies directed to private sector have a permanent *leitmotif* that pushes strict control and restriction. One of the policies, dating back several decades, requires high academic indicators from teaching-oriented and tuition-dependent institutions. Following this, private institutions are pushed to raise the fare of undergraduate tuitions in order to face the extra-costs caused by the new exigencies imposed by the government. However, since most of these institutions operate in a market with low elasticity, these policies reinforce the worse side of private education, supporting concentration and commoditization of teaching (Balbachevsky and Schwartzman 2007; Sampaio 2011).

Conclusions

From the pictures outlined above, it is clear that higher education in Brazil faces strong challenges. The central issue requires higher education to change its core mission by rebuilding the social pact that sustains the long-lasting relationships between university and society (Gornitza, Maassen, Olsen, and Stensaker 2007). However, Brazil's higher education is crucially ill-equipped to face such challenges. There exist not only different rationales evoked by different layers of policy, but also a wide mismatch between the stakeholders' ideals and the country's reality. Unless these conflicts reach a compromise point, it is impossible to produce a stable paradigm framework that could support the continuity of higher education policies.

In the years ahead, the demand for higher education is expected to grow sharply as the country's most conspicuous inequalities are being addressed by the public

policies. More and more children from middle-class families will seek to enroll in higher education. On the other hand, as the national economy faces globalization, demand for quality education and research is becoming a central issue in the country's development. These new realities pose strong challenges for both the public and private sector. To the public sector, the main challenge is to answer the demand of access to higher education without jeopardizing the function of universities as a place to preserve and develop knowledge. While to the private sector, the main challenge is to make institutions' flexibility and keenness meet with the market logics, which enable them to answer for the new skills and competences demanded by the labor market.

Note

1. Brazil, like all Latin-American countries, adopt the old continental model of higher education where undergraduate training is supposed to end up in a bachelor's degree, which certifies the completion of the first cycle of higher education and, at the same time, accredits the holder as a full-fledged professional, entitled to exercise his/her profession.

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