

Rethinking São Paulo's Higher Education System

Jacques Marcovitch

In March 2020, COVID-19 unlocked and accelerated five distinct crises in Brazil: health-related, economic, social, political, and geopolitical. The high degree of unpredictability resulting from the pandemic meant that all institutions of higher education, whether national or international, public, private, or nongovernmental had to seek out more flexible and agile organizational structures to respond to different dimensions of the effects of the crises. The future of universities can be understood in the context of a new era in construction, requiring them to confront the five challenges presented below.

Preserving and defending university autonomy requires universities to strengthen their governance and the process of selecting leaders. They should also update the way in which pluriannual plans are constructed and seek closer connection with society in order to advocate for, and reinforce, the importance of autonomy for higher education institutions.

Second, we need to ensure the *continued financing of higher education*, which is contingent on government actions and crises afflicting the country. Universities need to be more proactive, working together with legislators in defense of their budgets. They need to expand and diversify the ways through which they attract resources for research and innovation, whether in collaboration, from national or international research funds, or from private sources.

Promoting and accelerating social inclusion and insertion needs to be at the center of plans for economic recovery and regional development. This requires building integrated social inclusion strategies, of which affirmative action makes up a small but crucial part, and also involves lifelong support, improved use of teaching technology, and access to healthcare and social welfare systems, among other measures.

Tracking graduates from higher education institutions through their working lives is also important. This is a continuous process of improving methodology, expanding the range of data available, and maintaining engaged networks of former students and offering them channels to contribute to the development of their institution.

Last but not least, it is essential to rethink the *connection with all sectors of society*, in order to prioritize community development. The community is not only the scientific community, or business elites, but everyone who contributes to the upkeep of, and benefits from, the university. This is a vital part of a long-term strategy.

These challenges strengthen the bonds that universities have with the society that finances them. They should be brought to the attention of governors, parliamentarians, healthcare authorities, workers' and employers' unions, as well as any other sphere that is willing to be part of the difficult undertaking of constructing the twenty-first century.

Looking at public higher education in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, we posit that universities must rethink their relationship with society in order to contribute to social and economic recovery.

State Higher Education in São Paulo

The public higher education system in São Paulo is a driving force in the social, economic, and cultural life of the country. It is central to training the workforce, creating innovation and new knowledge, and driving social development and inclusion. The system is also the curator of heritage, culture, and identity. It manages many of its most important museums, galleries, and venues, and stages countless cultural events both alone and in partnership with other organizations.

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Abstract

COVID-19 unlocked and accelerated five distinct crises in Brazil: health-related, economic, social, political, and geopolitical. In its aftermath, universities in Brazil and beyond must confront challenges related to autonomy, financing, their connection to society, and governance. Looking at public higher education in the state of São Paulo, we posit that universities must rethink their relationship to society in order to contribute to social and economic recovery.

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across the country. What is learned during postgraduate training in São Paulo has the potential to mold culture and practice in higher education.

The state of São Paulo has a population of 45 million, of whom around 20 percent are under 15 years old. At BRL 2 trillion, its GDP is equivalent to 32 percent of the national GDP. The state supports and finances three universities, the University of São Paulo (USP), the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), and São Paulo State University (Unesp), which receive US\$4 billion per year, as well as a state research foundation that allocated the equivalent of USD 195 million in 2021. These institutions are financed by a fixed portion of the state sales tax (ICMS), which gives them a high level of autonomy with a relative degree of budgetary predictability.

Since the turn of the millennium, São Paulo's public higher education system has expanded significantly, with undergraduate enrollment increasing by 56 percent from 67,000 in 2000 to 120,000 in 2020. São Paulo state institutions have campuses in 28 cities and towns, reaching areas far from the state capital and traditional centers of influence. São Paulo's universities are often required to fulfill roles in public health and social security that in more developed countries are carried out by public authorities. While the size and reach of higher education in the state of São Paulo may be exceptional, it shares many of the same challenges as other universities in Latin America and other lower-income countries, where higher education plays a special role in nation building.

Confronting the Coronavirus

During the pandemic, university hospitals, among the most extensive in the country, dealt with tens of thousands of cases through the public health system. Universities were on the frontline of a public information program, filling the void left by the denialist federal government.

USP served as the state's principal research and manufacturing center for COVID vaccines. Laboratories in all the universities worked tirelessly on sequencing, treatment modalities, and other aspects in response to the crisis, trading information round the clock with institutions from across the world, making use of open science platforms that greatly accelerated the free exchange of knowledge. Despite this momentous contribution, institutional data gathering, academic evaluation, and communication of results broadly fail to reflect this impact.

Given that public universities in São Paulo, but also elsewhere in Brazil and Latin America, have such a distinct role in nation building, it is imperative that the way we conceive of universities and measure and represent their value is rethought.

Rethinking the University

The Sustainable Development Goals, digital transition, and cooperation between countries make higher education a haven to address the fundamental needs of the new era. The administration of every university must determine indicators, costs, and procedures for the proposal from the United Nations to become more than just a list of well-intentioned aspirations.

These challenges are more ambitious than adding a few new indicators. They require careful analysis of how and why different stakeholders value the university and ensuring that they are engaged with planning and evaluation processes, to draw the outside world into the sphere of university governance.

Rethinking the university means defending its values, strengthening its commitment to teaching, research, and outreach and, at the same time, renewing its bonds with a society in rapid transformation. This type of rethinking and adaptation cannot be carried out by a single research group, or a single institution, but requires the dedication of a whole ecosystem of institutions working together. ▲

Jacques Marcovitch is the former president of the University of São Paulo and the coordinator of "metricas," a project trying to develop social impact indicators for the universities of São Paulo and Brazil. E-mail: jmarcovi@usp.br.