



Higher Education in Brazil and the New Administration: What Is at Stake?

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Education in Brazil has suffered a series of setbacks at all levels during the last four years, including the level of graduate education, which had been somewhat immune to the effects of prior critical periods. The COVID-19 pandemic played its part, but the precarious situation was aggravated by complete inaction of the Bolsonaro administration, which had four ministers of education in four years (actually five, but the appointment of one of them was canceled after it had been disclosed that his CV contained false academic credentials). None of these people was seen fit for the mission of leading one of the most important areas of governance.

The incoming administration of president Lula has not only declared an intention to change things but has already started developing new initiatives and programs. The new ministry of education leadership, with Camilo Santana as minister and qualified people in other key posts, has been welcomed by education and policy specialists. The National Institute of Educational Statistics, which is responsible for collecting and publicizing educational data and develops all major educational assessment programs in the country, including participation in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), is being rebuilt after four years of neglect.

Abstract

Science and higher education in Brazil have suffered greatly over the past few years, and the new administration of president Lula has promised to bring back the budgets of federal universities to historical levels and to make a strong effort toward social inclusion in higher education. We highlight the main funding-related issues, and also discuss efforts toward social inclusion, such as affirmative action programs and the revisited 2012 national quota law.

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Funding the Federal System of Universities

The most urgent issue concerns financing the federal system of universities, which are responsible for most fundamental sciences programs, a large part of graduate education, and most of the country's scientific output. The system comprises 68 universities, located in all 26 states and in the national capital (Brasilia). After reaching its highest value of 4.3 billion Brazilian reais (about USD 1.8 billion at the time) in 2014, the systems' discretionary budget—i.e., what the universities can use for investments, etc.—fell to 2.6 billion Brazilian reais (about USD 660 million) in 2019 (first year of Bolsonaro's term) and further to 1.6 billion Brazilian reais (about USD 310 million) in 2022. In terms of constant purchasing power parity measured in Brazilian reais, the 2022 discretionary budget was only 38 percent of that of 2014 and 64 percent of that of 2019. Such extreme lack of support for the federal system of universities is unprecedented in recent Brazilian history, and has impacted it negatively in many ways. It is worth mentioning that the federal system underwent considerable expansion between 2008 and 2018 as a result of a federal program called REUNI. The number of undergraduate students enrolled in the system doubled in the period, from 600,000 to 1.32 million.

Decline in Federal Support for Graduate Education and Research

But things worsen further due to the decline in funding for graduate education and science, which is also relevant for state-level education and for a large part of the country's non-profit private institutions. The main federal agency that supports research, CNPq, reduced its expenditures from the 2015–2018 period to the Bolsonaro years (2019–2022) by 43 percent (averages of the two four-year periods). Another relevant agency, CAPES, which mostly provides graduate scholarships, has reported that the expenditures for 2019–2021 were, on average, 21 percent lower than in 2015–2018. The number of doctorates granted by Brazilian higher education institutions in 2020 and 2021 were about 20 percent lower than in 2019, after more than two decades of almost continuous growth. Part of that drop can be attributed to the pandemic, which seems to have caused a delay in finishing dissertations, but the cuts in funds for scholarships and research grants will likely prolong this effect. One long-term problem regarding funding of graduate education is the decade-long budgetary restrictions which have caused a freeze in scholarships indexation since 2013. Scholarships are now at an all-time low in terms of purchasing power, making it more difficult to attract new students.

What the New Administration Is Proposing

Before even looking at other aspects of higher education in Brazil, the new federal administration has already promised to make an all-out effort to bring budgets of federal HEIs and agencies back to historical levels. It will not be an easy task, since there are severe fiscal restrictions. The original budget for federal universities planned for 2023 is still very low—even lower than that of 2022 (corrected for inflation). The new administration has promised to increase the ministry of education's budget by about 12 billion Brazilian reais (equivalent to about USD 4 billion in terms of purchasing power parity), but that is supposed to go not only toward universities' budgets, but also to be spent on the ministry's other activities, including CAPES scholarships, transfers to regional governments for basic education programs and so on.

Social Inclusion

Another relevant issue is that of social inclusion in higher education, a topic which has been at the forefront of Brazilian politics since the turn of the century. Over the last two decades, Brazilian public universities have developed—either voluntarily or under regulatory requirements—various affirmative action initiatives, including quotas for graduates of public high schools, for those who self-identify as Black, special admission procedures for students of indigenous backgrounds and so on. The new administration is—in stark contrast to the outgoing one—a strong supporter of such programs, which also include scholarships and subsidized loans for poor students at private HEIs. There is much to be done, especially regarding retention of and support for the newly admitted groups, many of whom are first-generation students. The 2012 national quota law is up to revision by congress soon (it was scheduled for 2022 but has been delayed), and there are

calls to remove the color/race criteria from its provisions. Since such a revision would affect the federal system, the federal government will certainly have a say on this issue.

The Pandemic and Basic Education

Another topic related to admissions and social inclusion in higher education is basic education. Basic education has in many ways taken a huge hit due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the public sector, including secondary schools. There are already studies showing not only a drop in the secondary education attainment rate, but also reporting lower levels of proficiency students in the last year of secondary school. It may be too early to assess all impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the country's educational system, but they have certainly been negative, and some of them will have a long-lasting effect with repercussions in higher education as students go through various levels of education. The previous federal administration did little to help, claiming that basic education was the responsibility of states and municipalities (which is true). The new minister of education, Camilo Santana, is former governor of the northeastern state of Ceará, which has shown better results in basic education than most other states. The minister has promised that the federal government will do all it can to help states and municipalities mitigate any deficiencies as soon as they are identified.

Admissions and the Expansion of Distance Learning

One of the immediate effects of problems in secondary education related to admissions to higher education is the steep decline in participation in the national test (known as ENEM) used for admissions to federal and other universities. In 2014 and 2016, over eight million students registered for the test, but in 2022, only 3.4 million did, and less than 2.5 million actually took the test. This has not only immediate causes, but also structural ones. There has been a vertiginous increase in the number of low-cost distance-learning programs offered by for-profit higher education institutions, which now account for over 50 percent of all new enrollments and which do not require ENEM score for admission. There is also the so-called self-exclusion process, meaning that students graduating from public high schools may consider themselves not competitive enough for the more selective public universities. There is data showing a decline in participation in the national admission test by those from lower socioeconomic strata, which includes graduates of public schools and the majority of the country's Black population.

What to Expect?

The new administration faces the challenge of reversing the previous administration's severe cuts to higher education and research funding, ensuring social inclusion in higher education, supporting affirmative action initiatives, and deciding on regulatory and quality assessment issues caused by the rapid expansion of distance learning in Brazilian higher education. Additionally, there are fiscal restrictions that may restrain the government from expanding the ministry of education's budget. Whether the ministry manages to deliver in all areas, remains to be seen, but expectations are very high, as education was one of the main electoral points in Lula's campaign and in his criticism of Bolsonaro's record. ▲

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