



Affirmative Actions in Brazilian Higher Education

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Abstract

Brazilian public universities have been predominantly elitist throughout their existence. The law on quotas, implemented in 2012 and currently under review, was one of the initiatives that challenged the system. This article provides an overview of the initial steps and current developments in affirmative actions in Brazilian higher education, pointing to some of the main challenges and potential outcomes of democratizing higher education in a country with significant social asymmetries.

It was only in the 2000s that Brazilian public universities started implementing affirmative action policies as a means to democratize higher education and give more equal conditions to socially marginalized groups. Law 12.711 from 2012 was a milestone in this regard. This law prescribed new admission rules, defining that 50 percent of all available undergraduate places should be reserved for students who completed their secondary education in the public system, distributed among families with an income equal to or less than 1.5 minimum wages per capita; and Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. In 2016, people with disabilities who fit the low-income socioeconomic profile were also included.

This and other related affirmative action policies have played critical roles in forcing the Brazilian public higher education system to adapt its structure and even reasons for being. From 2012 to 2021, more than one million higher education students were covered by the law on quotas. And since 2014, 60 percent of undergraduate students in public HEIs come from public schools and 70 percent come from families with income of up to 1.5 minimum wages per capita. Regarding racial composition, in 2019, Black and Brown students represented around 50 percent of the student population.

As a result of a political context that is more open to the demands of minorities, and the active pressures of social movements, in 2023, the law on quotas was amended to include “quilombolas,” remnants of communities of escaped enslaved people, and to reduce candidates’ maximum per capita family income. The new version of the law also prescribes new parameters for the inclusion of Black, Brown, Indigenous and disabled people in graduate programs, and introduces annual monitoring cycles.

This update seeks to mitigate some flaws identified in the 10 years of the law’s existence and promises to further democratize Brazilian public higher education. Yet, several related issues remain unaddressed and challenge the purposes of historical reparation, social justice, and respect to diversity, which form the rationale behind affirmative actions.

Challenges and Potential Outcomes

The literature is controversial about the effects of affirmative action policies, which is amplified by the insufficiency of results monitoring. Let us address some of the related challenges.

Public Funding

Brazilian public HEIs are financed by society and this fact itself has always been an object of intense debate. One of the historical criticisms on this matter refers to the historically restricted access for certain social groups. The idea that everyone pays and only a few enjoy, especially in a country with significant social asymmetries, has always been controversial.

Because of affirmative actions, the general profile of the student population has changed over the past years, now better representing Brazilian society as it is. Even though this could be a reason to overcome this understanding, the gratuity of Brazilian public higher education remains largely questioned, now with even stronger pressures from the global market and greater criticism from the conservative elites. In this regard, it is important to remember that Brazilian public universities were significantly delegitimized under the Bolsonaro government, leading to “a chronology of tragedies,” as pointed out by myself and Marcelo Knobel in a [2021 IHE article](#).

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Student Retention

One of the most challenging aspects when admitting vulnerable students to public HEIs is the (lack of) capacity to retain them. Black students tend to have a high dropout rate due to discontinuation of governmental support programs aimed at keeping them in, in addition to facing experiences of racism and exclusion.

Regarding financial support, most renowned universities are still located in the capitals, where scholarships provided to vulnerable students are often insufficient for their survival. Only in 2023, after 10 years, scholarships were adjusted. The need to work has been identified as one of the reasons for a general loss of interest in staying at the university. For example, the number of applications to the Enem examination—the main gateway to federal universities—was the second lowest in 2022 since 2005, with 3.4 million applicants compared to 8.7 million in 2014.

Regarding academic performance, students admitted under affirmative action programs often face difficulties resulting from a weak educational background, demanding significant institutional investments in monitoring and assistance. In essence, affirmative actions do not guarantee that all students will reach a good level of academic quality.

Finally, there is a lack of institutional preparedness to deal with historically marginalized groups. Reports of segregation between quota and non-quota students suggest the need for investment in raising awareness among the entire academic community.

Inclusion and Controversies Around It

Even though affirmative action policies have diversified the undergraduate student body, the same cannot be said of graduate researchers or faculty members, as there are still substantial inequalities in terms of gender, race, and geographical origin.

Additionally, if the academic model and knowledge production remain largely hegemonic, it is likely that a simple democratization of access will not provoke the required structural change. Universities need to take the opportunity of including socially marginalized groups to question their own role in the perpetuation of colonialism and dialogue with society in less hierarchical ways.

Internationalization

Critical studies on internationalization of Brazilian higher education characterize the process of internationalization as colonized and colonizing, more competitive than cooperative, and neither suited for nor directed toward the needs of the Global South. Universities strive for higher levels of international recognition and regard internationalization from the perspective of individualized competitive advantage.

Internationalization remains elitist in nature, and most internationalization opportunities are only available for a very small portion of the student body. Scholarships for international academic mobility often impose criteria that are not easily achieved by those coming from a weak educational background.

Recently there seems to be some recognition of the importance of less hegemonic internationalization strategies. This includes the announced Caminhos Amefricanos program that seeks to strengthen an antiracist education internationally, and the relaunch of the Abdias Nascimento program that seeks to provide minorities with opportunities in research excellence centers in Brazil and abroad.

Potential Outcomes

Individual and collective outcomes of affirmative action policies in Brazilian higher education cannot be neglected as such policies have challenged the general profile of historically elitist institutions. Yet, there is still a long journey ahead to create necessary conditions for the educational success of underrepresented students. Effective postadmission support, preparation of the university community, fight against racism, dialogue with society, and constant monitoring of results are some of the critical requirements for a true social justice dialogue. In the long term, the greatest potential of affirmative action might lie in the active participation of those subject to racism and discrimination in the rewriting of their history and in promotion of antiracist/decolonized education.

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