

## Brazil Seeks Academic Boost by Sending Students Abroad

Marcelo Knobel

Marcelo Knobel is dean of undergraduate programs, at Universidade Estadual de Campinas (University of Campinas), Brazil. E-mail: knobel@reitoria.unicamp.br.

Brazil has just launched a program to dramatically increase the number of Brazilian students abroad. Although it counts with public-financial resources, no one really knows if the ambitious quantitative goals can be reached.

### **SCIENCE WITHOUT BORDERS**

Just a few days after the official visit of President Barack Obama to Brazil in March 2011, the Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff announced that it is a top priority of the government to send at least 75 thousand university students to spend a period in US higher education institutions. Today, it is estimated that there are around 8,800 Brazilians enrolled in American campuses, the 14th rank among such foreign groups. Although the statement was made with considerable fanfare, it was given without further details. Also, the speech mentioned this kind of program's importance for the hard sciences and technological programs, mainly engineering, in order to allow the country to have a more qualified workforce in these strategic areas.

Since this announcement, the Brazilian research agencies struggled to design the plan, now called Science without Borders, launched officially in July 2011. The program

finally includes not only the United States, but also other countries. The Brazilian government claims that it will look for private sponsors to pay tuition and fees to partner universities. The plan includes undergraduate students (around 35% of the scholarships), PhD students (46% of the scholarships), and also fellowships for postdoctorate and senior researchers. The total budget for a period of four years is estimated to be around US\$2 billion.

It is clear that the intentions of the Science without Borders program are significant; and clearly some international experience should become a fundamental part of higher education, especially for a country like Brazil, which has seen increasing engagement in the international arena. Providing students with the possibility of an international experience is considered to be an effective strategy—from a geopolitical perspective as well as the academic viewpoint.

#### **HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRAZIL**

Brazil has a population of 195 million inhabitants. Brazil has a quite diverse higher education system, with a relatively small number of public (federal, state, or municipal) research universities and a large number of private institutions—both philanthropic/confessional and for-profit. Approximately 6 million students have enrolled in undergraduate programs around the country, with 77 percent of those in private institutions. There are a number of consolidated research centers (both federal and state owned), which granted 12,000 PhDs and 41,000 master's degrees, in 2010. The consolidation of the graduate system during the 1970s and 1980s included a systematic effort to finance graduate and postdoctoral studies in other countries. A large part of the

participants in those programs returned to Brazil and helped to qualify the higher education institutions and the budding graduate programs in the country, particularly in public universities. After this initial period, the federal policies changed to strengthen the different programs within the country, drastically reducing the number of fellowships to send students abroad. Such policies resulted in a decrease of the degree of international experience of faculty in research-intensive universities. Thus, the proposed initiative discussed here reveals the reversal of current federal policies toward the graduate education sector.

#### **THE COMPARISON WITH THE US INITIATIVE TO CHINA**

This program is certainly related to the so-called “100,000 strong Initiative,” considered to be a key component of the Obama administration’s foreign-policy agenda. Thus, there would be a coordinated effort designed to increase dramatically the number and diversify the composition of American students studying in China. Similar to the Brazilian case, this initiative is tempered by serious concerns about the achievability of such an ambitious target. However, contrary to the Brazilian case, the Obama administration is putting forward a challenge but no cash, claiming that financial support for the effort is required from private sources.

The main challenges in Brazil are of another nature, related to the number of qualified students able to undertake academic study in foreign universities. Considering the quality and leadership of the US higher education sector, for example, it is fair to suppose that any good student at a high-quality university would consider applying to a “bridge scholarship,” given by the Brazilian government.

Nobody really understands how this “magic” number of 75 thousand students was set as a goal. In 2009, approximately 58 thousand PhD students and 104 thousand master students were enrolled in Brazilian universities in all fields of knowledge. Only 20 institutions granted more than 100 PhD titles in 2009. Considering these numbers, it is clear why undergraduate students and postdocs must also participate in the program. The challenge will be to verify whether there are enough qualified students, with minimum language requirements, capable and willing to travel abroad and study in top world universities.

#### **PRIORITIES AND FUNDING**

The program focuses mainly on health and life sciences and on the so-called STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), with an emphasis on engineering. It is well known that engineering and basic-science education (both in number and quality) are considered to be among the main constraints to the immediate and future development of the Brazilian society, and certainly a program centered in these fields is an urgent necessity. On the other hand, it would be interesting to extend the program to other fields of knowledge in the near future.

From the point of view of the partner countries, the program has already received some criticisms, mainly in the United Kingdom, where a recent £200 million cut of state funding for higher education was made by the government. It is expected that Brazilians would not attain places otherwise available to British and European Union students. Nonetheless, concerns were raised that the UK government's funding model for higher education is becoming increasingly reliant on attracting overseas

nationals who, if born in the United Kingdom, might have struggled to become a regular student at a university there. Also, long-term partners such as Portugal were almost completely excluded, at least in this initial stage of the program, causing some negative reactions.

Finally, one of the most important criticisms regarding this program is its unilateral character. The program should be a real exchange program, with reciprocity from the counterpart university to support and stimulate their students to perform academic study in Brazil. This would be extremely beneficial to the Brazilian universities to boost their incipient internationalization process. Considering the total budget of the program, the issue of further planning and discussions in regard to priorities for spending public money in overseas universities becomes even more important.

The main stakeholders assume that a program like this needs further discussion and should be based on solid studies that constitute higher education policy, goals and priorities, and taking into account the reality of the current Brazilian education scenario and the globalized higher education sector.