The Tragedies of Brazilian Higher Education

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Abstract
Continuing our reflection on critical policy changes in Brazilian higher education since President Bolsonaro assumed office in January 2019, this article presents what we call "a chronology of tragedies," a review of events that have taken place since September 2019. These events reveal the ways in which federal policies continue to threaten university autonomy, even though the public higher education sector has proved to be fundamental to fighting the current COVID-19 pandemic.

In previous articles, we summarized critical policy changes in Brazilian higher education since President Jair Bolsonaro took office in January 2019. Essentially, we referred to uncertainties, controversies, and pushbacks to which the sector has been subjected: budget constraints imposed on science and public higher education institutions (HEIs); the president's ideological bias against the humanities; and the "Future-se" program, a proposal from the ministry of education with a neoliberal perspective, intended to increase the financial autonomy of federal public HEIs—while intensifying mechanisms to control them.

In this article, we continue this reflection, presenting what we call "a chronology of tragedies," a review of events that have taken place in Brazilian higher education since September 2019. These events reveal the ways in which federal policies have continued to threaten university autonomy, even though the public higher education sector has proved to be fundamental to fighting the current COVID-19 pandemic.

More Uncertainties, Controversies, and Pushbacks

One of the notable effects of Bolsonaro's policies on higher education has been the sector's instability. Many of his measures were imposed without any dialogue with universities and representative associations, resulting in strong resistance and initiatives being canceled or postponed.

The third minister of education since the start of his presidency was replaced in July 2020. Abraham Weintraub's administration was the second and longest (from April 2019 to June 2020) and left a very negative legacy. Due to his ideological positions and hostility toward public universities and academics, Weintraub had to leave office. He went so far with his controversial attitudes that the president could no longer justify keeping him in his post. Perhaps one of the more egregious moments was when Weintraub showed up at a small progovernment demonstration in June 2020—in the middle of one of the worst public health catastrophes in modern history—without a mask. He greeted demonstrators and proclaimed: "I don't want more sociologists or anthropologists. I don't want more philosophers with my money."

Economist Carlos Alberto Decotelli was nominated to follow Weintraub. However, due to several inconsistencies in his academic qualifications, including inaccurate information and accusations of plagiarism, he was not appointed. In July, Presbyterian priest Milton Ribeiro assumed the ministry, provoking new concerns following statements such as suggesting that being homosexual is a matter of education and values. In general, the minister has adopted an extremely low profile, but, unfortunately, the situation for higher education and science is not improving at all.

More Budget Constraints

Budget cuts constraining public universities and science funding have continued and are expected to reach greater levels in 2021. At the beginning of 2020, the federal agency Capes announced a new model for granting research scholarships to graduate students, prioritizing technological areas. Similarly, the federal agency CNPq excluded humanities and social sciences from priority research projects to be funded from 2020 to 2023. This was justified in the interest of "accelerating the country's economic and social development."

Capes and CNPq are the main funding agencies of research scholarships in Brazil. Capes is also responsible for assessing and accrediting graduate programs, so that the

restriction of research funding to a few "priority fields" potentially puts the development of many areas and academic freedom at risk, with serious consequences for critical thinking.

Successive budget constraints will be magnified, as federal HEIs are expected to face an additional 18 percent cut (corresponding to approximately US$185 million) in 2021 on discretionary expenses (payments, investments, and student assistance). This situation will be worsened by the approval of a project that reallocates approximately the equivalent of US$260 million from the ministry of education to the ministries of infrastructure and of regional development in November. This, the associations of federal HEIs argue, will harm teaching, research, and extension/outreach activities, with a direct impact on Brazilian society.

More Threats to Administrative Autonomy

After the rejection of the "Future-se Program" by the vast majority of federal HEIs, the government searched for new ways to interfere with their administration. Last June, the president published a provisional measure according to which, when a rector's four-year term ends during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry of education designates his or her successor, deviating from the long and well-established tradition of election of university leaders by faculty, administrative staff, and students. Since the federal government has shown very little concern with the COVID-19 pandemic, this measure appeared to be a means of interfering with their autonomy. Indeed, the assertion that it would not be possible to vote for new rectors during the pandemic is absurd, as most activities have continued remotely and current technology makes distance voting possible and safe. Fortunately, the senate overturned the decision, as it deviated from the Brazilian constitution.

According to the constitution, the process starts with an internal institutional vote. The university council then sends the president a list highlighting the top three nominees. Since the country's return to democracy, the practice has been that the president nominates the first candidate on the list, respecting the choice of the university community. Since 2019, Bolsonaro has nominated rectors following 27 university elections, but in 10 of them he disregarded the choice of the institutions. In one of the cases, the president's designated candidate was not even on the list. Even though there is no obligation, accepting the academic community's preference is an important expression of respect for the autonomy and legitimacy of institutions that suffered from a lack of democracy during the military dictatorship. The management of a complex university by an individual who was not chosen by a majority of the community only exacerbates tensions within the academic environment.

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Another concern is the federal government's intention to permanently expand distance learning at federal HEIs. In October, the president established two working groups to present strategies in this regard. The COVID-19 pandemic has led HEIs to find ways to provide remote learning as an emergency measure. However, issues such as quality and student access to technology need to be addressed and broadly discussed by HEIs and representative institutions. As public HEIs have broadened access over recent years, more students from low-income families have enrolled. Risks of digital inequality as a result of permanently expanded distance learning cannot be disregarded. Before attempting such a major shift, HEIs must be given the possibility to assess and mitigate its potential impact in terms of access and quality.

Paradoxically, despite all the tragedies that the public higher education system has suffered, the current moment might be considered an opportunity for HEIs to reinforce their value to society by getting closer to the communities that surround them. After years of relentless attacks, with the pandemic the media have been giving more space to faculty members to be heard and emphasize the importance of research to address critical public issues such as fighting the virus. Public HEIs are responsible for 95 percent of the country's research and their combined voices are an essential counterpoint to the denial of the seriousness of the virus and to the suggestion that "science is fiction," propagated by the Bolsonaro administration. Attempts to silence academics and control universities put democracy, development, and social well-being at risk across the country and damage the achievements that arise from university autonomy and academic freedom worldwide. ◢

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