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Higher education in Brazil: a comprehensive view ♦

Clarissa Eckert Baeta Neves*
Carlos Benedito Martins**

Abstract

This article presents an overview of the structure and functioning of Brazilian higher education, focusing on the transformations that took place in the last twenty years. The main topics covered include: i) characterization of Brazilian higher education: institutional and academic organization; ii) system expansion: coexistence of public and private systems; iii) recent policies on access, inclusion and permanence in higher education; iv) development of the national *stricto sensu* graduate system; v) academic internationalization; and vi) challenges posed.

Keywords: higher education; expansion; inclusion policies; challenges.

♦ This article is an abridged and updated version of the chapter *Ensino superior no Brasil: uma visão abrangente*, published in the book *Jovens universitários em um mundo em transformação : uma pesquisa sino-brasileira* (Dwyer et al., 2016).

* Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil.
** University of Brasília (UnB), Brasília, DF, Brazil

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the widespread perception in Brazil that the expansion and qualification of higher education are structural conditions for development, the country has one of the lowest enrollment rates in higher education among countries with similar levels of development, and the overall performance of the higher education system has been unsatisfactory.

Brazil is a country of contrasts and its higher education reflects this persistent historical trait. A striking contrast is the coexistence of a (minor) public education with private education (differentiated and largely majoritarian in terms of enrollments and number of educational institutions), parallel to a financing regime that is unable to sustain a consistent process of social inclusion. This system is also characterized by flagrant disparity in quality of education between institutions and between undergraduate and *stricto sensu* graduate education – master's and doctorates.

The actors involved, particularly those responsible for the public policies on education, are aware of these inequalities. This, however, has not been translated into actions capable of paving a clear and consistent path of change.

This article aims to provide the basic elements for understanding the current situation of higher education in Brazil, as well as the challenges and dilemmas that affect it.

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN BRAZIL

The organization of a higher education system in Brazil was legally established in the Federal Constitution of 1988 and was regulated in the National Educational Bases and Guidelines Law of 1996. Free education in public higher education institutions (HEIs) was constitutionally guaranteed (Brazil, 1988, Article 206); a link was established between tax revenue and the maintenance and development of federal public education; and the participation of private sector in the offer of higher education was guaranteed, within limits set by law (Ranieri, 2000).

The transformations that took place in higher education in Brazil were determined by the system's basic institutional characteristics. These include: i) a segment of institutions maintained by the public authority (federal, state and municipal) that offer free education, and a segment of institutions maintained by the private sector, which are mainly supported by tuition fees; ii) heterogeneity in terms of academic quality between public and private segments and also within these two segments; iii) coexistence of university and non-university institutions; iv) great discrepancy in enrollments distribution between public and private segments, both for undergraduate and graduate, and poor differentiation in higher education offer in general; v) high concentration in the Ministry of Education (MEC) of prerogatives for the formulation of policies and instruments for supervision, control and evaluation of the federal and private systems; vi) a financing model that jeopardizes the expansion of enrollments and social inclusion; vii) largely exclusionary access to higher education, despite policies for inclusion; viii) consolidation of a vigorous graduate system, based on a quadrennial peer evaluation and on continuous furtherance programs; and ix) increasing concern for internationalization of higher education.

Public and private sectors in higher education

The higher education system consists of two well-defined and distinct segments: one public and one private. The public sector encompasses federal, state and municipal public HEIs that do not charge tuition fees and are supported by the respective administrations. The private segment consists of different types of HEIs, such as confessional, community-based, philanthropic and private[1]; the first three types are non-profit institutions. At the end of 1999 the government authorized the operation of private HEIs identified as for-profit (Brazil, Law 9.870 / 1999)[2] (Sampaio, 2011).

[1] Community-based HEIs emerged in the late 1980s as a specific kind of institution characterized as "public non-state", strongly linked to local and regional communities. They are nonprofit HEIs. Confessional HEIs are characterized by its church- or faith-based support. They are also philanthropic. The most important are the traditional Catholic HEIs present in most Brazilian capitals and the PUCs (Pontifical Catholic University).

[2] This law amended the National Educational Bases and Guidelines Law (LDB), with the insertion of a clause establishing that the "[private] supporters of HEIs, provided for in item II of Article 19 of the LDB, may assume any of the forms admitted in law, either of civil or commercial nature" (Nunes, Carvalho and Albrecht, 2009).

Another characteristic of the higher education system refers to the type of linkage between the HEIs and the national higher education regulation system and to the state and municipal systems. The national system (Brazil, 1996, Article 16) comprises HEIs run by the federal government, HEIs created and run by the private sector and the federal agencies of education. The creation, authorization and recognition of courses by HEIs, and the institutional certification of HEIs are bound to federal laws and regulations. The Ministry of Education (MEC) holds the prerogative to formulate policies, establish support and development programs, and set regulatory, monitoring and evaluation models. It is also responsible for funding federal public HEIs. State (provincial) and municipal HEIs are outside MEC's and the National Education Council's (CNE) jurisdiction, being bound to the respective state and municipal systems. However, they are subject to federal laws and regulations when competing for federal public funds for scholarships and research financing (Neves, 2002).

Academic organization

HEIs distinguish between: i) *University Institutions*: which comprise *universities*, whose functions are teaching, research and community outreach activities, and shall have one-third of teachers with a master's or doctor's degree and one-third contracted full time; and the *higher education centers* characterized by the offer of qualified education, by not being required to maintain research activities and enjoying autonomy to create courses and expand the number of places; and ii) Non-university Institutions: including independent faculties, technological centers, and institutes, that are in essence teaching institutions without autonomy and dependent on the National Education Council (CNE) for the approval of new courses and further number of places.

The standard undergraduate courses, in both private and public HEIs, are the four-year full-time study bachelor's degree and the *licenciatura*, a degree equivalent to bachelor's aimed at preparing teachers for basic education. The technological courses generally consist of three-years full time

study, and distance learning courses have a varied duration. The *stricto sensu* graduate level offers two-year full-time study academic master's courses and professional master's courses, and four-year doctoral courses. The *lato sensu* (specialization) graduate courses vary in format depending on duration and type of the course offered.

Access to higher education

Admission to higher education courses was mainly accomplished by means of selective entrance examinations (subjective and/or objective tests) – denominated *vestibular* – which assessed student's prior knowledge. In 1998, the National High School Examination (Enem) was created, which evaluates the skills and abilities developed in twelve years of basic schooling, and is offered annually to high school graduates, who may choose to do it or not. Enem's final grade is used by many universities and by the governmental program of social inclusion - Prouni (University for All Program) - as a selection criterion for assigning places in higher education institutions, either public or private. Since 2009, Enem has four functions, namely: i) to evaluate knowledge acquired by students during high school; ii) to allow students to apply for a Prouni scholarship and to take a loan from the Student Financing Fund (Fies) to attend a private HEI; iii) to serve as the high school final examination for students that completed the EJA, the youth and adult education program for people who did not complete secondary education at the proper age; and iv) to either replace or add scores in Brazilian HEI's *vestibular* (entrance examination). HEIs use Enem's scores as a selection criterion, either completely replacing the *vestibular* or complementing it with the final grade achieved in Enem.

Another innovation towards access to higher education is the Unified Selection System (SISU) Program that integrates public HEIs. It is a computerized system, managed by the MEC since 2010, through which public institutions of higher education offer places for candidates participating in Enem. The participating institutions inform in the website of Sisu, previously to each selection

process, the number of places they are offering. In 2018, Sisu provided 239,716 places, in 100 federal public HEIs and 30 state HEIs. The number of candidates was 1,824,727 (INEP, 2018). The relationship between places and candidates reveals a fierce competition for places in public HEIs. Although innovative, the program served, in 2018, only 7.6% of the candidates.

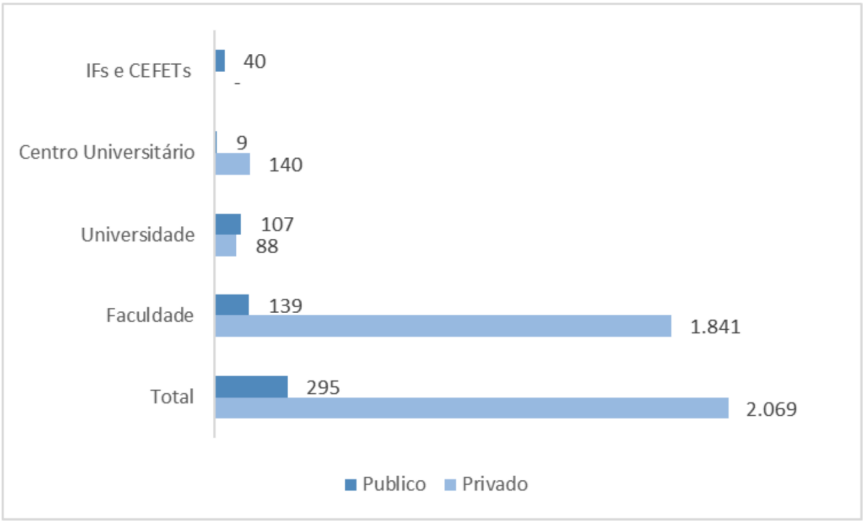
Expansion of higher education in Brazil

The expansion of higher education in recent decades has not been the result of educational planning by government agencies. The logic behind its expansion has been largely driven by the logic of demand and supply, in which the private sector has played an important role in meeting the demand for mass education.

There are marked differences between public and private sectors. In 2015, Brazil had 2,364 HEIs, 2,069 of which were private (87.5%) and 295 public (12.5%). Among the private ones, there were 998 for profit HEIs (48.2%) and 1,072 non-profits (51.8%). Most of for-profit HEIs were affiliated with one of the five largest educational corporations in Brazil - Estácio, Kroton, Being Educational, Anima, and Laureate – whose securities are traded on the national stock market. Public HEIs include 107 federal (36.3%), 118 state owned (40%), and 49 municipal HEIs (16.6%). Twenty-one (7.1%) HEIs fall into the special category[3]. Out of the total number of HEIs, there were 195 universities (54.9% of them public); 140 private higher education centers, and only 9 public higher education centers; 1,980 HEIs are independent colleges (83.8%), most of them private (93%). There were, in addition, 40 technological institutes, all of them public.

[3] A category defined in art. 242 of the 1988 Federal Constitution as an "official educational institution created by state or municipal law, existing by the time of the promulgation of the Federal Constitution and that is not fully or mainly maintained by public funds, therefore being not free". (Translator's note).

Chart 1 - Institutions by academic organization and type of ownership - Brazil, 2015

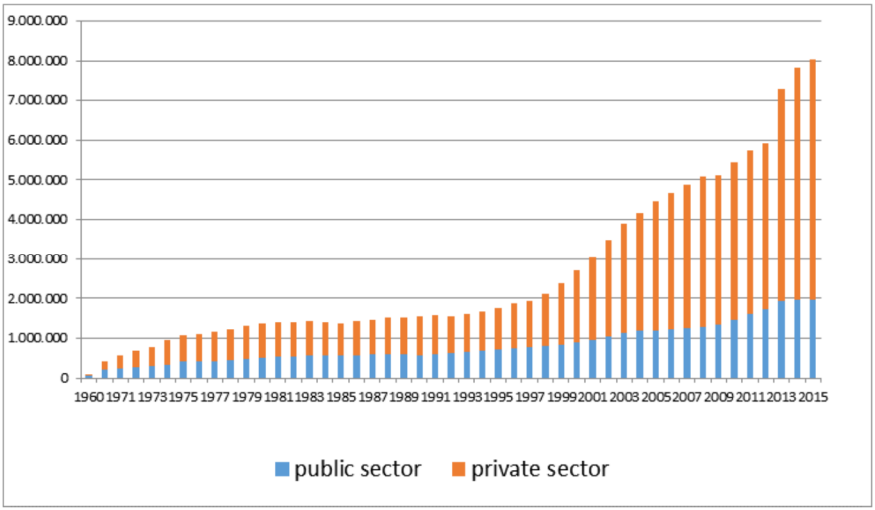


Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from INEP (2016).

The growth of enrollments in on-campus undergraduate courses by type of ownership (public *vs*. private), between 1960 and 2015, can be seen in the chart below. In the first phase of the expansion, enrollments, which amounted to 93,000 in 1960, were concentrated in the public sector, which held 56% of the total. In 1970, total enrollment jumped to 425,500, 49% out of which in public HEIs. Yet in 1975, enrollments reached 1,100,000 students, 62% out of them enrolled in the private sector.

After a period of stagnation, between 1975 and 1995, enrollment growth rates accelerated in the private sector, which grew 70.6% against 26.6% in the public sector, until the year 2000. As of the 2000s, the greatest growth occurred in the private sector; in contrast, the public sector grew slightly from 2007 onwards with the REUNI - Restructuring Program of Public HEIs.

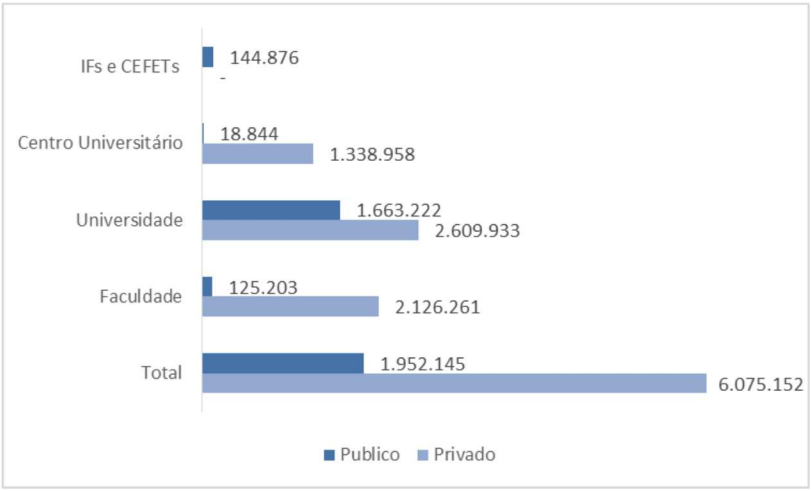
Chart 2 - Evolution of enrollment in on-campus undergraduate programs, by type of ownership - Brazil, 1960-2015



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from INEP (2015).

Considering the latter 20 years, enrollment in higher education grew by 360%, from 1,759,703 students in 1995 to 8,027,297, in 2015, including on-campus and distance learning. There was an increase in enrollment in federal public HEIs, however, without changing the weight of the private sector in the system. As shown in Chart 3, in 2015, enrollment in undergraduate education was mostly concentrated in the private sector (75.6%). Distance learning (EAD) has been growing rapidly in recent years. In 2006, it accounted for 4.4% of undergraduate enrollments and in 2015 it had jumped to 15% of enrollments.

Chart 3 - Enrollment by academic organization and type of ownership - Brazil, 2015



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from INEP (2016).

Considering the academic degree of the students enrolled in on-campus undergraduate courses, 61% attended baccalaureate programs; 23%, *licenciatura*; and 16% sought a *tecnólogo* (technical education) degree. The number of graduates from undergraduate courses was 352,305 in 2001; 865,161 in 2011; and 1,150,067 in 2015 (INEP, 2015).

A distinguishing feature between public and private HEIs is the offer of courses in the evening shift. Public HEIs offer primarily daytime courses, while in private HEIs most are offered in the evening shift. Public institutions have been increasing the proportion of evening courses (around 18%), but in private institutions they correspond to about 82% of places.

The expansion of Brazilian higher education, besides being marked by the growing presence of private education, has been also characterized by a strong emphasis on careers and courses whose implementation costs are lower, namely courses in the areas of human sciences and applied social sciences (Nunes, 2007a). As the services sector represents a high percentage of Brazilian GDP (73%) (IBGE, 2017), careers such as law and management emerge as a polyvalent resource, favoring the perception that they can open many doors in the labor market (Nunes, 2007b; Menezes Filho, 2012).

Table 1 - Total enrollment in on-campus undergraduate programs, by knowledge area and growth in the period - Brazil, 2012 – 2016

	2012	2016	Growth (%)
Total	**5.923.838**	**8.020.012**	**35%**
Education	913.648	1.524.329	67%
Humanities and arts	155.964	175.556	13%
Aplied social sciences	2.416.486	3.001.506	24%
Science, mathematics and computing	406.236	455.420	12%
Engineering, production and constrution	865.301	1.244.605	44%
Agriculture and veterinary	163.034	227.626	40%
Health	862.497	1.223.528	42%
Services	115.110	167.442	45%

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from INEP (2016).

Table 1 shows a large concentration of enrollments in the area of applied social sciences (37.5%). Recent transformations in the structure of production and economic growth generated a demand for technical education profiles, especially in engineering. The growth of enrollment in engineering careers (44% between 2012 and 2016) demonstrates this response of the higher education system to the labor market demand. However, they still represent only 15% of total enrollment. Federal government initiatives have sought to boost the growth of places in technological and engineering courses (Gusso; Nascimento, 2011).

The following characteristics of the system are also worth noting: women comprised 57% of total enrollment in higher education and female students represented 60.9% of the graduates; half of the students in on-campus courses were aged up to 24 years, 25% of them under 21, and the average age of students in on-campus courses was 26 years; in distance learning courses, half of the students were aged up to 32 years, the 25% youngest out of them being under 26; the average age in these courses was 33 years (Inep, 2015).

The total number of teachers working in the country's higher education system, in 2015, was 388,004. Among them, 38.5% had a doctorate. In public HEIs, 57.9% had a doctorate, while in non-profit private HEIs, only 25.5% of the teachers (Inep, 2015).

POLICIES FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The expansion of higher education has faced some challenges, such as the expansion of public HEIs, greater inclusion of low-income youth in the system, and financing alternatives for students who depend on the private sector for their education. These challenges have been addressed by means of specific and distinct programs, with public funding, but whose implementation still face many problems.

Affirmative policies

In the early 2000s, data on Brazilian higher education revealed marked inequalities in access by race and income. In 2003, 21% of young whites between the ages of 18 and 24 had access to higher education; among non-whites this percentage was 5%. Among higher education students aged between 18 to 24, most belonged to high income households: 59.2% belonged to households in the fifth income quintile, as opposed to 2.3% from households in the first (lowest) income quintile (IBGE, 2003).

It was in this scenario that the first Brazilian universities adopted affirmative action programs (PAAs), setting aside places aimed at black and low-income

students. State laws – for example, in Rio de Janeiro state – began to ensure quotas in state HEIs. Among federal higher education institutions, the creation of affirmative action programs was voluntary until the year 2012. In general, the reserve of places amounted to 30%, being 15% for social quotas and 15% for racial quotas.

In 2012, a decree regulating the Quotas Law (Law no. 7,711/2012) was enacted, providing that federal public universities and federal technical institutes shall reserve at least 50% of the places for students who have completed secondary education wholly in public schools, with proportional allocation of places among blacks, *pardos* (mixed race) and indigenous people (Brazil, 2012). State HEIs, in São Paulo state, adopt a point system in the selection process, granting extra points to candidates from under-represented minorities.

University for All Program/ProUni

ProUni is a federal government program that aims to provide places to low-income students in private higher education institutions, whether for-profit or non-profit. In return, HEIs that receive students benefiting from the program will be exempt from certain taxes. This Program was regulated by a Presidential Order (*Medida Provisória* No. 213/2004), and afterwards was enacted into Law No. 11,096 / 2005 (Brazil, 2005).

The program awards full and partial (50%) undergraduate scholarships. Since 2007, it also allows partial scholarship holders to apply for a loan from FIES to finance the remaining amount of the tuition fees. To qualify for a full scholarship, household (*per capita*) income of the candidate cannot exceed 1.5 minimum wages; partial scholarships may be awarded to students with a *per capita* household income of up to three minimum wages. It is also required from applicants to have completed the whole secondary education in public schools or with full scholarship in private institutions.

Candidates' selection is based on the score attained in Enem. The minimum required is 450 points (in a total of 1,000); and the higher the score achieved the greater the chances of candidates to choose the course and the institution in which they will study.

The student loans program, FIES

Education credit is a key instrument for the survival of a significant part of the private sector. FIES is a government supported student loan system established in 1999, which consists of funds from the federal lottery and from the annual budget of the MEC. Fies is intended to finance undergraduate education in private institutions for students who are unable to fully afford the costs of their education. Applicant students must be regularly enrolled in paid HEIs, and HEIs must be registered in the program and be recognized by MEC. Fies is operated by the federal bank Caixa Econômica Federal (Brazil, [s.d.] b).

This system had some of its provisions changed in 2011, including the extension of repayment terms and the reduction of interest rates. Other changes were introduced in 2017. The number of new loan contracts skyrocketed between 2010 and 2014, after the first set of changes – from 50 thousand a year to over 700 thousand, in 2014. Since then, government has reduced new loans to about 250 thousand a year, and new and stricter rules for eligibility have been put in place.

In recent years, Brazil has taken important steps towards social inclusion. The impact of these measures and programs shows a growth, albeit gradual, in the percentage of students from the poorest sections of society. Federal government made a substantial investment in the federal higher education public system. New universities and new college campuses were created. Likewise, federal technological institutes were implemented either as a reorganization of preexisting units or as a result of investments in new units. Enrollment in public HEIs resumed its growth, although without significantly changing the weight of the private sector in the system as a whole, which still holds 75.6% of enrollments. That is, even with the growth of the public sector and new inclusion policies, the democratization of access to higher education is still very limited.

NATIONAL GRADUATE EDUCATION SYSTEM

One of the most relevant aspects of Brazilian higher education concerns the emergence and development of a vigorous national *stricto sensu* graduate

education system, which covers the full range of knowledge areas. The phenomenon allowed for a significant renewal in higher education, promoting the institutionalization of research activity in Brazilian universities that, until the mid-1960s, developed basically teaching activities (Teixeira, 1989).

Graduate education was institutionalized in Brazil through the University Reform of 1968, which modernized the higher education system. The Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), a foundation of the Ministry of Education, is the body responsible for graduate education policy and for consolidating and expanding *stricto sensu* graduate programs (masters and doctorate) in all states of the Federation. The National Graduate Education Plans (PNPGs) were crucial for the architecture and development of the graduate education system. Since the mid-1970s, there have been five PNPGs. Unlike the undergraduate education that underwent a disorderly expansion process, the PNPGs gave a macro-political direction to the conduction of graduate education, through periodic diagnoses and the establishment of goals and actions. PNPGs were articulated to a broad system of government funding for science and technology (S&T), particularly to two federal government development agencies: Coordination of Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes) and National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) (Martins, 2002).

Capes' activities can be grouped into the following lines of action: investments in the training of high-level assets in the country and abroad, through granting scholarships; evaluation of *stricto sensu* graduate programs; promotion of international scientific cooperation; access to and dissemination of scientific production; induction and promotion of the initial and continuous training of basic education teachers either on-campus or through distance learning.

Especially important was the implementation, as of 1976, of the National System of Evaluation of Graduate Education by CAPES, which was firmly based on the direct participation of academic community members. This system is the basis of the process for authorization and recognition of master's

and doctoral courses and for the national validation of their diplomas. The evaluation process is based on the analysis by peers of the reports of the courses on their annual performance. A grade is given to each graduate program, which is now reviewed every four years. As of 1998, the grade scale changed to a numerical system ranging from 1 to 7. Three axes characterize the evaluation: (a) it is carried out by peers with established intellectual reputation and coming from different areas of knowledge; (b) it has meritocratic nature; and (c) it combines recognition and development, defining policies and setting criteria for program funding.

Graduate education (masters and doctorate) has also presented strong growth. Between 2010 and 2016, the number of programs grew from 2,840 to 4,177. In 2016, there were 159,178 students enrolled in master's degree courses and 107,640 in doctorates. In this same year, 59,614 masters and 20,657 doctors graduated (Capes, 2016). Within a higher education system in which quantitatively prevail private institutions, graduate studies have been mainly concentrated in public universities.

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRAZIL

Another challenge posed to higher education is the internationalization of its activities. The issue of internationalization started to gain room in the concerns of academics, university managers and in higher education policy as a result of the publication of international rankings and the dissemination of the concept of 'world class universities'. Some institutions have developed their own conceptions and strategies, without positively affecting the system as whole. The process that led to the formation of the best university institutions is strongly related to academic missions carried out abroad. The consolidation of graduate education fostered international academic exchange.

Traditionally, Brazilian HEIs have few resources and instruments available to develop their own and consistent plans for international insertion. They are, in most cases, dependent on supporting programs maintained by the development agencies (Capes, CNPq, for example). These programs, however, are restricted to

specific projects of cooperation with particular countries, mainly through funding for academic mobility.

Brazil has maintained programs for supporting students from Latin American and African countries in undergraduate, masters and doctorate courses at HEIs in the country. These programs are a response to Brazilian foreign policy initiatives to approach the countries of these two regions. This experience did not generate institutional policies for attracting and accommodating foreign students and even less for creating organized communities of former scholarship holders in Brazil in their countries of origin. The HEIs have merely reacted to existing demand sent to them or which arises spontaneously.

In 2011, the federal government launched the *Programa Ciência sem Fronteiras* (Sciences without Borders Program) aimed at internationalizing Brazilian higher education through international mobility of undergraduate and postgraduate students in technological areas. About 79% out of the more than 92,000 scholarships granted between 2011 and 2016 were intended for undergraduate students.

The initiatives of the most important universities to define strategies and pursue broader and more complex institutional goals related to internationalization is very recent. This involves the integration of universities into international undergraduate education networks, the improvement of infrastructure and the furtherance of research groups in cutting edge areas, so that they can become attraction poles for doctorates and postdoctoral studies. It is about affirming the university as an international reference in areas of knowledge and research considered strategic, reinforcing symmetrical partnerships and opening up teaching to international exposure and global competition.

FINAL REMARKS: CHALLENGES AHEAD

In Brazil there has been a rapid growth in enrollments in higher education, which precipitates, however, the recognition of bottlenecks and of the need for implementing policies capable of solving them and ensuring an adequate response to the demands. The growth of enrollments is evident. However,

the persistence of huge social inequalities in both access to and permanence in higher education remains an urgent challenge to be faced. The great and recurrent challenges ahead are the expansion of enrollment with democratization of access and the differentiation of education offer, in order to meet demands from the economy and the society, attain excellence in offered education and an adequate equation for financing expansion.

Brazil has a higher education system whose construction was marked by the coexistence of two sectors: public and private. In the public sector, the state guarantees investments and the full funding of studies. The private sector is supported mainly by tuition fees paid by the families or by the students themselves. The intertwining between public system and private sector lies on the philanthropy, through education credit programs and either direct or indirect subsidies to philanthropic institutions in the form of fiscal waiver, among others. In this way, the public authority intends to provide opportunities to contingents of candidates from lower income families for access to higher education in private institutions. Even so, an intensification of the problem of financing new low-income demand is observed today, since the offer of places in the free public sector grows in a limited way, and direct or indirect subsidy programs for supporting students in the private sector are far from meeting the real demand.

Brazilian higher education was structured as a complex and heterogeneous academic field, showing a great institutional diversity, as it happened in several higher education systems of many countries (Shavit, Arum and Gamoran, 2007). Some public and private universities have gradually been organized into an academic model based on the quality of teaching and research. These institutions created academic structures that fostered institutionalized scientific production, developed *stricto sensu* graduate programs, promoted the professionalization of the academic career, adopted the full-time regime for their teachers, preserved academic freedom and associated teaching and research activities in partnership with national development agencies.

In turn, business private institutions tended to structure their activities based on the offer of vocational training. In general, these institutions are primarily aimed at a strict vocational training and employ hourly teachers with low

academic degrees, who are mostly dedicated to teaching activities. These institutions, generally, lack consolidated research and *stricto sensu* graduate structures. The vocational training offered seeks to meet both the diversity of demand and its private financing capacity. For this reason, it focuses on teaching areas that require lower investments and have greater market appeal. The growth and profitability of private higher education have attracted groups of foreign investors and, today, it is observed the formation of educational conglomerates that control hundreds of thousands of enrollments.

In this scenario, the challenges of quality and social inclusion in Brazilian higher education are pressing. Addressing it requires coordinated action, consistent policies, and the improvement of this education system with a long-term view. Only policies conducted with clearly established objectives will be able to define new paths to the higher education system, facing the challenges of Brazil's insertion into the international scenario of globalization.

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Clarissa Eckert Baeta Neves - PhD in sociology from the University of Münster, Germany. Full Professor at the Graduate Program of Sociology, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), researcher at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and coordinator of the University Studies Research Group at UFRGS. ✉ clarissa.neves@yahoo.com.br

Carlos Benedito Martins - PhD in sociology from L'Université Paris Descartes, Paris. Full Professor at the Department of Sociology of the University of Brasília (UnB), where he coordinates the research line on education, science and technology. ✉ carlosb@unb.br

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