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Higher Education and Science in Brazil: A Walk toward the Cliff?

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In Brazil, decisions made by the federal government have historically determined the development of higher education, science, technology, and innovation, given its central role in terms of policy, funding, and regulation. Since the 1930s, when the first federal and state universities were created, there has been a prevailing and general understanding among national authorities that the development of a sovereign nation depends on progressive investments in the education of human resources and the promotion of science. Direct efforts to consolidate a national policy for science date back to the postwar period, when the Coordination of Improvement of Higher Level Personnel (Capes) and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) were founded.

Both public universities and funding agencies became fundamental to the country's development, to the extent that today, it would be impossible to imagine that Brazil could meet critical national demands of social and economic growth without the participation of these institutions. Given this context, the recent declarations by President Jair Bolsonaro since assuming office in January 2019 and measures enacted or proposed by his government have caused great concern and created considerable confusion. This article summarizes the main events that have taken place and possible implications for the future.

UNCERTAINTY, CONTROVERSIES, AND PUSHBACKS

From January to March 2019, the ministry of education under Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez suffered from an "internal war," resulting in great instability. In regard to higher education, Vélez Rodríguez asserted that "the idea of university for all people does not exist. Universities should be reserved for an intellectual elite." This was considered particularly offensive as enrollment in higher education in Brazil is still the privilege of the elite: according to the OECD's Education at Glance 2018, fewer than 20 percent of the segment of the population between the ages of 25

and 34 hold a university degree. His attitude also reversed recent attempts to broaden access and democratize public higher education.

In March 2019, a surprising cut of 42 percent of the budget of the ministry of science, technology, innovation, and communications was announced—while the current government reached the presidency promising increased investments in science, technology, and innovation (ST&I) from the current 1.5 percent of the GDP to 3 percent, which would be comparable to the European Union. The decision also provoked concern because of its harmful consequences for both universities and society at large. Universities depend on the resources of federally funded public agencies to finance research. Disrupting the flow of resources will prevent the country from addressing many of its social and economic challenges. In addition, strategic sectors such as health, energy, and agriculture will be severely affected if such constraints are not reconsidered.

A month after taking office, he announced that three federal universities—Brasília (UnB), Fluminense (UFF), and Bahia (UFBA)—would face budget cuts for allegedly promoting turmoil and for poor academic performance.

PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIs) AS MAIN TARGETS

In April 2019, economist Abraham Weintraub replaced Véllez Rodrigues at the ministry of education. Immediately following his appointment, President Bolsonaro announced on Twitter that Minister Weintraub was considering cuts to investments in schools of philosophy and sociology, indicating his preference “to focus on fields that generate an immediate return to the taxpayer such as veterinary medicine, engineering, and medicine.” This dismissal of humanities and social sciences reflects the president’s ideological position and his hostility toward public universities and academics, a threat not only to the operation of these institutions, but also to academic freedom.

A month after taking office, he announced that three federal universities—Brasília (UnB), Fluminense (UFF), and Bahia (UFBA)—would face budget cuts for allegedly promoting turmoil and for poor academic performance. According to Weintraub, “homework needs to be done: scientific publishing, up-to-date assessments, good positions in rankings.” Ironically, these three institutions are among

the best in Brazil according to national rankings measuring teaching quality and international rankings measuring research productivity, raising doubts about the actual motivations behind his decision. Budget constraints quickly spread to the entire federal system. If this measure materializes, all federal universities and institutes will face a 30 percent cut in their 2019 operational budgets, putting into question their viability in the second semester.

In addition to the cuts themselves, what was very disturbing was the effort to minimize public criticism. In a weird attempt to explain the measure, the minister stated that the cut represents “only” 3.5 percent of the federal higher education budget. As pensions and salaries cannot be cut, the proposed budget reductions will have an even more significant impact on daily operations of universities. Given what public HEIs represent for Brazil, these cuts effectively “cut the government’s own throat.”

Additional concern arose in May 2019, when Capes stopped more than 3,000 scholarships for graduate students without prior notice. The agency stated that these were only cuts to “idle” scholarships, which did not make sense. One-third of those scholarships were restored after protests from the universities. However, in June 2019, Capes changed the criteria for providing graduate programs with scholarships, which resulted in an additional cut of 2,500 scholarships.

Also, in June 2019, an intervention raised concerns about the autonomy of public universities. For the first time in two decades, the ministry of education broke with the tradition of approving the appointment of a rector who won an election held by the university community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION

Bolsonaro’s agenda for higher education will also probably affect attempts to internationalize the system through its impact on at least three important national programs: the *Programa Doutorado-Sanduiche no Exterior* (Capes–PDSE), which funds international mobility for doctoral researchers; the *Programa Institucional de Internacionalização* (Capes–PrInt), which supports internationalization at HEIs; and the *Programa Idiomas sem Fronteiras* (IsF), which promotes foreign language capacity among university communities.

Finally, the 30 percent budget cut in the federal system will probably affect South–South and regional cooperation. While national programs for internationalization have mostly focused on the United States and Europe, there are important initiatives that have been financed through institutional budgets.

TRUTHS THAT NEED TO BE TOLD AND EFFORTS OF RESISTANCE

Government criticism against Brazilian higher education is not substantiated. For example, the president claims that public HEIs are not productive—yet, while they represent

only 12.1 percent of the national system, they are responsible for 95 percent of national research productivity, and their social role goes beyond research to reach Brazilian society in many important ways. Another unproven assertion is that public universities are populated with “leftists” and “Marxists,” while these institutions actually reflect broader society in terms of political positions.

Finally, even though public universities, traditionally, have been elitist, they have become more democratic in recent years. For example, a 2018 Survey of the Socioeconomic Profile of Students at Federal HEIs shows that 70 percent of undergraduate students at these institutions come from families with a monthly income of up to R\$1,500 (about US\$370). There are also quotas for graduates of public high schools and minority groups that contribute to diversity and help curb the country’s great social inequality.

Although the allegations of the president and his minister of education and the austerity measures they propose are met with public disapproval and attract international attention and protest, we believe that these are just initial steps toward a potential disaster for science and higher education in Brazil. ■

“More with Less” in Higher Education in Mexico

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After two attempts to win the presidency, Andrés Manuel López Obrador was elected president of Mexico for the 2018–2024 term. His higher education plan corresponds to what could be defined as a neopopulist agenda. The purpose of this article is to discuss the concept of neopopulism, compare this agenda with those of other neopopulist governments in Latin America, and share concerns on the future of higher education in Mexico.

NEOPOPULISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The concept of neopopulism has been used by political scientists, sociologists, and historians to describe govern-

ments based on regimes led by charismatic leaders; the development of social policies aiming to expand a strong popular support base providing legitimacy for governmental projects; the erosion and even the destruction of political and legal counterparts and of check and balance systems that may oppose presidential decisions; the spread of distrust against civil and nongovernmental organizations; and attacks against individuals, groups, and a free press that criticize the government.

With regard to education, typical neopopulist government policies in Latin America lead to a massification of educational services at all levels; the expansion of scholarships and individual subsidies provided by the government; the establishment of affirmative action measures in favor of the most vulnerable populations; and disregard for international evaluations and standardized tests. In sum, under such regimes, quantity is favored over quality. The two main higher education policy instruments of neopopulist governments are massive numbers of scholarships and enrollment growth. Two typical examples are programs established in Brazil and Argentina.

Lula da Silva, president of Brazil from 2003 to 2011, started the University for All program (known by its Portuguese acronym “ProUni”), subsidizing students enrolled at private universities. Dilma Rousseff, president from 2011 to 2016, continued this program and added two components: Financial Aid and Funding for Higher Education Students (FIES). At the end of these two governmental periods, the programs had reached 2.5 million students. In addition, the Support Program for Restructuring and Expanding Plans of Federal Universities (Reuni) created 30 new federal institutes and 25 university campuses.

In Argentina, during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (from 2007 to 2015), the Support for Argentinian Students Program (known by its Spanish acronym PROGRESAR) gave financial support to students to keep them in school or provide them with vocational training. Approximately 320,000 higher education students received this benefit. Besides this program, 18 new national universities were established, in addition to five provincial universities. Similar programs were introduced in Ecuador under Rafael Correa (from 2007 to 2017) and in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez (from 1999 to 2013) and deserve to be studied more closely.

In Argentina and Brazil, the difficulties in solving the economic crisis and cases of corruption explain in many ways the electoral victory of right-wing political parties. Mauricio Macri was elected president in 2015 in Argentina, and in Brazil, Michel Temer was elected president in 2016, followed by Jair Bolsonaro in 2019. Macri’s government carried on some of the programs established by the Kirchner administration while reducing public expenditures in