Inclusion Policies in the Brazilian System of Higher Education: The Public and the Private Sectors*

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Brazil’s experience with affirmative action policies in higher education started in the year of 2003. This paper analyzes inclusion policies in both the public and the private sectors of higher education which differ a lot in the country. It shows how these policies have encouraged increased diversity among students, welcoming groups that have been virtually absent from higher education: poor, blacks, natives, and people with disability thus benefiting those that have been historically unprivileged in Brazilian society. Being a country of immense inequalities, Brazil through these policies will benefit from a set of professionals, whose life experiences are closer to that of the population. An important consequence of the implementation of affirmative action policies at universities has been the public debate on how to combat poverty and racism in a society that used to see itself as a racial democracy.

Keywords: Brazilian higher education, affirmative action, inclusion policies, diversity

Today as the sixth world economy, Brazil is a country of significant income, educational, racial, and regional inequalities. These have historically translated into fewer opportunities in the job market and denial of full enjoyment of constitutional citizens’ rights for some, thus reinforcing a vicious cycle of exclusion. A new international atmosphere conducive to the protection of human rights and to the struggle for material and not just formal equality between citizens has led to critiques to its higher education system that discriminates against certain segments of the population—blacks, native people, the poor, and the disabled people—while favoring an economically privileged white elite.

This paper analyzes inclusion policies in both the public and the private sectors of higher education system in Brazil, looking at how they have encouraged increased diversity among university students. These policies, also referred to as affirmative action, are transitory. They comprise a series of governmental or institutional actions and orientations aimed at benefiting groups that have been historically unprivileged. From this perspective, the underrepresentation of certain groups in power and prestige positions in society can be seen as an effect of discrimination (Oliven, 2007).

In Brazil, according to the Federal Constitution, public education is free of charge at all levels. Elementary school (eight year of schooling) is compulsory. Once a student has finished elementary school, he/she can start middle school without any process of selection. But not all young Brazilians complete either elementary or

* The author thanks Demétrius Rico Ávila, Social Sciences student at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), for his collaboration in collecting ProUni data.

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Higher education is selective mainly in the public sector and the process of selection is based on what is called Vestibular, a multiple choice question exam and a written essay based on a theme presented during the examination.

The students must choose a professionally oriented course when applying to enter into the university. The degree of selectivity can vary a lot according to the courses. Medicine is always the most selected one with more than 30 candidates per vacancy in good universities. The vacancies in each course are allocated to the candidates with best results in the Vestibular. Some years ago an examination—ENEM (Exame Nacional da Educação Média—National Examination of the Middle School) was introduced for students at the end of the middle school. Performance in this exam started to be used in the selection process of many universities instead of or in conjunction with the Vestibular.

Research in Brazil takes place mainly in the public universities. The best research universities with Ph.D. programs are in two of the three state universities in São Paulo, the richest state in Brazil and in the federal universities. The latter are maintained by the Ministry of Education.

The private sector of higher education is newer than the public and started with a strong religious influence, mainly Catholic. It mushroomed in the last decades and got increasingly heterogeneous comprising institutions for profit as well as community, philanthropic, and religious ones. Most of these institutions offer evening courses and do not develop research activities.

The Public Sector

In Brazil, affirmative action policies in higher education did not emerge until the present century. The first experience took place in 2003, in Rio de Janeiro’s state universities. At the federal level, the University of Brasilia was a pioneer. Today, according to data from the Color Policies Program (Programa de Políticas da Cor), 84 public higher education institutions include in their selection processes certain kinds of precedence to groups that have been minorities in this sector. Most of them deploy a system of quotas, be it racial or social—the latter often refers to priority for students educated in public schools, where the majority students are poor. These schools have fewer resources than the elite private schools typically attended by the children of the middle class.

The vast majority of Brazilian public universities that have affirmative action programs earmark a certain percentage of places for these students, who may participate in the selection process as a cotista (quota holder) as long as they match the eligibility criteria. The latter varies among the universities, and typically includes a minimal course-specific performance threshold in the selection process. In the State of São Paulo, three public universities implement a bonus system.

Another form of inclusion policy has been the expansion of the federal higher education network through the REUNI (Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais—Restructuring and Expanding Federal Universities). It was launched by the federal government in 2007 and aims to significantly expand the availability of places for undergraduate students in the federal higher education sector.

The goal is to change the elitist character of public higher education by making undergraduate degrees more accessible to low income students as well as to those living in less urbanized areas. This has involved opening more evening courses and creating new institutions in a larger poll of towns. Since 2003, 14 new federal universities and more than 100 campuses of new and existing universities were created. This resulted in
the establishment of new undergraduate courses, more vacancies, and a greater reach of the public sector in less developed areas. The number of municipalities served by federal institutions jumped from 114 in 2003 to 237 in 2011.

The REUNI’s guidelines include the expansion of inclusion policies and assistance to students. By making better use of the physical infrastructure and human resources available in the federal universities, the program aims at creating the conditions for broader access to, and permanence in, higher education at the undergraduate level. Universities applying for REUNI’s benefits should present a plan outlining their strategy and the stages for achieving its proposed goals. Additional resources for covering the targets established by the institutions—hiring new professors, renovating buildings, libraries, and so forth—are provided in tandem with the conclusion of the stages established in the plan.

One of the consequences of the implementation of affirmative action policies in the public higher education sector—which is supposedly “free” due to the absence of registration fees, but is in fact supported by the state through taxes paid by the entire population—has been to spur nation-wide debates on inequalities in Brazil, the role of public universities, or the function of entrance exams as the single or chief yardstick for merit. The latter has legitimized a selection process that has consistently excluded representatives of a significant share of the Brazilian population—the poor, blacks, and natives.

**An Example of the Quota System in a Public University**

Located in Porto Alegre, the capital city of the Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state of the country, the UFRGS (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul—Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul) is among Brazil’s top research universities. In the debate within the UFRGS academic community over the possibility of implementing quotas in the selection process for its different courses, leaders of black movements and native communities were heard. After hearing the interested groups and based on negotiations with representatives from the academic community, the University Council decided to earmark 30% of places beginning in the academic year of 2008 for students coming from public schools, half of which for self-declared Afro-descendants. Besides social and racial quotas, 10 new places were created to cater to demands made by native people in courses chosen by these communities; there is a special selection process in this case. In 2008, the natives were admitted in nine courses: pedagogy, nursing, law, history, languages and literature, medicine, odontology, journalism, and agronomy. No candidate was approved for mathematic course.

A socio-economic questionnaire applied to the university applicants every year shows the impact of the quotas program on the profile of students admitted to UFRGS. A study was carried out based on these data. The courses in which candidates enrolled were classified into three groups: low-density ones, with less than five candidates per available place; medium-density ones, with five-nine candidates per place; and high-density ones, with more than nine, including courses as medicine with more than 30 candidates per places.

A comparison between data from 2007 (when there was no quota policy) and those from 2008, 2009 and 2010 (when this policy was in place) shows significant changes: in 2007, less than a third (31.53%) of the total of students that entered into the university came from public middle schools; in the years that followed, this

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1 The UFRGS University Council’s Decision No. 134/2007 instituted the Affirmative Action Program which earmarked places in all undergraduate courses for candidates coming from public elementary and high schools, for those self-declared as blacks coming from public schools, as well as for native applicants.

2 See Report on Student Registration Within the Scope of UFRGS Quotas Policy, 2008-2010.
These results make evident how the opportunity to study in private schools, where students are better trained for public universities’ entrance exams, contributes to the reproduction of privileges by reducing the likelihood that students who attend public schools are admitted to the selective public universities.

The same comparison, made for students from public schools who declared themselves as blacks, shows an even more significant trend. This is not surprising due to the almost invisibility of black students in UFRGS previously to the quota policy. In 2007, only 3.27% of admitted students self-declared as black. In the following year, this figure rose to 11.03%. In the higher density courses, it rose from 2.05% in 2007 to 10.47% in the following year, a fivefold increase in the number of blacks. In the medium density courses, the increase was almost fourfold, from 7.99% to 30.73%, and in lower density ones, the percentage doubled. The latter are courses that are less appealing to the better-off students, as they provide fewer opportunities in the labor market.

For Doeber and Grisa (2011, p. 593),

The public university needs Afro-descendants as much as they need it; new projects, new ideas, and a displacement of the epistemological curiosity, which has been always directed by the gaze of Brazil’s white elite, are vital elements for promoting the necessary scientific changes.

The Private Sector

The ProUni, University for All Program (Universidade Para Todos), was created in 2004 by presidential decree, and the implementation began in the following year based on the Federal Law No. 11,096/2005. This program provides full or partial funding for students in undergraduate or sequential courses; the grant pays for enrollment fees in private higher education institutions. The institutions interested in being part of the program earmark 10% or 20% of places in exchange for tax exemptions.

According to the data published on the ProUni website, applicants to the grants should be Brazilian, not hold a university degree, have studied in public schools (or in private schools with full scholarship), be a member of a low-income household, and take the ENEM. The program takes into account the population ratio of blacks and natives in the state where the institution is located, based on census figures. The applicants to ethno-racial places should also be eligible according to the criteria just mentioned. Disabled students are also eligible to the Program.

The benefits range from full grants (for students with per capita family income up to one minimum wage and a half) to 50% or 25% grants for students with per capita family income of up to three minimum wages³. Each applicant may choose two courses and two institutions. The indication of institutions and courses is based on the applicants’ scores in the ENEM, thus being merit-based. Since there are withdrawals and redeployments, two rounds of calls are made based on the list of successful applicants. At the end of the second round, the available grants are offered to those in the ProUni waiting list. The applicant to a ProUni grant does not need to take the vestibular, entrance exams of the university in which he/she wishes to enroll. Depending on the courses, the pre-selected applicants may be submitted to a specific selection process, free of charge.

In the first year of ProUni, the Ministry of Education provided 112,275 grants. Based on data from 2005 to

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³ Per capita family income is calculated by adding up the gross income of all family members, divided by the number of people in the family unit. If the result is lower than one and a half minimum wage, the student may apply for a full grant. If it is higher than one and a half minimum wage and lower or equal to three minimum wages, the student may apply for a partial grant. The family unit comprises the applicant plus those living in the same household who live off the family’s monthly income, and who are related to the applicant either as father, stepfather, mother, stepmother, spouse, partner, child, stepchild, sibling, or grandparent.
2010, the number of grants available rose to more than one million, not all of which were deployed. The grants are offered for both onsite courses and distance learning. For the period of 2005-2011, most benefits awarded were full grants (67%). This underscores the low income of applicants, since in order to get a full grant the per capita family income should be no higher than one and a half minimum wage. This is further substantiated by the time shift attended by most grantees.

The distribution of grantees in onsite courses according to time shifts shows that most students are enrolled in evening courses: that is, 601,360 grantees (74%); others are enrolled during the day in part time courses, either in morning or in afternoon classes. They are low-income students who typically have part or full time jobs. Those that attend full-time courses, such as medicine, are much fewer, only 30,889, for them there is an extra financial aid.

Another piece of data revealing of ProUni’s expansion is the number of municipalities that offered ProUni grants until the end of 2010. These amounted to 981 municipalities. This broader geographical reach is a way of democratizing higher education. Many towns are benefited with a growing number of higher education students; this generally has a multiplier effect, as other young students are also encouraged to improve their education.

Official data about the ProUni from the INEP (Instituto Nacional de Estudos Pedagógicos—National Institute of Educational Research) disaggregate the private sector into administrative categories according to three sub-groups. These data indicate that nearly half the grantees are enrolled in private profit-based institutions, some of which offer courses that do not require much investment and have poor academic quality.

In the private sector, students’ fees and tuition pay for the hiring of faculty and staff, and the institutions’ survival depends on them. Institutions in the federal public sector are supported by the federal government and do not charge students’ fees. Courses offered by the federal sector have been historically concentrated in state capitals and large urban centers. This sector offers highly competitive courses, some of which are full-time.

After the 1968 University Reform, the federal sector developed an important graduate studies’ system, with qualified and full-time faculty. Simultaneously, undergraduate courses in the private sector multiplied in many places. A gap was then opened between qualitative expansion of higher education in the public sector and quantitative expansion in the private sector (Oliven, 1990).

The public sector maintained its elitist character, expanding its graduate programs and developing research. The expansion of undergraduate studies took place largely in the private sector. The latter met a different kind of demand for higher education, by low-income students many of whom are workers living in smaller cities or in the peripheries of large metropolises. Dependent on students’ fees for their survival, private institutions had to adapt to the characteristics of this new student population by offering cheaper evening courses, in smaller towns that lacked universities or in the peripheries of urban centers where poorer people live.

While the public sector includes 249 higher education institutions, the private sector has 2,032, that is, 89.1% of the total (Revista Ensino Superior, 2011). Their greater capillarity (in terms of location of courses offered in different time shifts) made them more accessible to applicants with lower economic and cultural capital.

At federal universities, competition for daytime and full-time courses is much more intense. These universities are relatively well distributed across all Brazilian states. On the other hand, many private institutions, which operate chiefly in the evenings and offer less competitive courses, concentrate on the more developed regions, where the population’s purchasing power is higher.
Diversity Among ProUni Grantees

Affirmative action policies tend to increase the student diversity in higher education institutions. In order to better know this with respect to ProUni grantees, they are compared according to the categories of gender and color. From 2005 to the end of 2011, around half of the grantees were females and half males: 51% and 49%, respectively. In relation to color, if the categories brown and black are aggregated, the percentage is almost the same as in the category white, that is, 47.9% have self-declared as browns or blacks, while 47.6% self-declared as whites.

Data for the distribution of grantees by gender mirror closely those for the Brazilian population at large, and for Brazil’s higher education in particular. Data on color bring to surface a different picture: On the one hand, they reflect the general data for the Brazilian population (about half whites, half blacks or browns); on the other hand, they diverge significantly from what is found in Brazil’s university system, where there is a high prevalence of white students.

Official statistics show how wide is the gap separating blacks and whites in Brazil (Paixão & Carvalho, 2010). The invisibility of blacks in most areas of power in Brazilian society, including the most prestigious courses in federal universities, is a form of non-recognition. As an affirmative action policy, the ProUni takes a step further in the struggle for more opportunities for black youth, who are largely excluded from Brazil’s academic universe.

Another group benefited by the ProUni is that of disabled persons: not even 1% of the grantees. In spite of the small number of disabled grantees, the question should be raised whether profit-based institutions and small institutions would be prepared for serving this group of 5,951 students with special needs.

Final Remarks

Brazil’s experience with affirmative action policies in higher education is a new one, and will complete one decade as the year of 2012 comes to an end. It is relatively early for a broader assessment, as experiences both in the public and private sectors may vary widely. It has been common to claim that to include blacks as subjects of rights in affirmative action policies would mean copying the United States. The New York Times website has even opened a space—“Room for Debate”—for Brazilian and other intellectuals to express their stances on the implementation of such policies in Brazil.

When it was first launched, ProUni became the target of multiple critiques due to the policy form chosen by the government, which increased the amount of available openings in higher education by privileging the private sector through tax reliefs (Catani, Hey, & Gilioli, 2006). In fact, about half of the places offered by this sector were vacant, so ProUni came to the rescue of courses that were about to be closed. The use of racial quotas has also been the subject of criticism (Fry, 2007).

On the side of civil society, a manifesto was issued in 2008 addressing Brazil’s Federal Supreme Court. It concerned a direct action of unconstitutionality filed by the National Confederation of Educational Institutions (Confederação Nacional dos Estabelecimentos de Ensino, Confenem) against the ProUni and the deployment of quotas in entrance exams in Rio de Janeiro’s state universities. In this document, titled One Hundred and Thirteen Anti-racist Citizens Against Racial Laws, the signatories pointed to the limitations and dangers of implementing differential policies based on racial criteria, claiming that these would incite racism in the society.
In the same year, another manifesto, called *120 Years of Struggle for Racial Equality in Brazil: A Manifesto in Defense of the Justice and Constitutionality of the Quotas*, argued that the implementation of racial quotas in public universities and in the private sector through the ProUni brought about a change and an ethical commitment by the Brazilian state to overcome a history of exclusion that has hit the black and the poor particularly hard.

The first manifesto takes on a universalistic stance that argues for the improvement of public services at large. The second manifesto underscores racial inequalities in Brazil and regards differential public policies as important weapons in the contemporary struggle against such inequalities.

In fact, differential policies are not opposed to universalistic ones. The former are needed today, so that elite university courses are no longer a predominantly white stronghold. Universalistic policies for improving income distribution as well as public services for the population at large are also needed, so that Brazil may become a more egalitarian society. On April 26, 2012, the Brazilian Supreme Court approved unanimously the constitutionality of racial quotas in public universities and soon after the constitutionality of ProUni Program which had been questioned.

The data on ProUni have shown a significant demand for higher education by low-income students self-declared as blacks or browns. This data show the number of grantees, but not of those who have graduated. The private sector of higher education is highly heterogeneous in terms of the size, material conditions, human resource qualifications, orientation (commercial, religious, communitarian, and philanthropic), and quality of education of many of its institutions. On the other hand, this sector offers at present more options in terms of time shifts and location where the courses are offered.

If the ProUni is to become an effective affirmative action policy rather than merely a mechanism for increasing enrollments in higher education, it should take into account not only access but also the learning process, including continuous enrollment and quality degrees. Inasmuch as Ministry of Education grants (which are now over one million) are provided in exchange for tax exemptions, an assessment of what is actually being offered to the grantees is vital for making sure that the resources cleared by the tax reliefs are being well allocated. One of the changes in the ProUni is that tax exemptions will be given to institutions according to the grants that are effectively used, since many institutions would inflate the number of available places in order to receive more grants. After all, the priority is the public interest, not that of profit-based institutions.

Studies have shown that, overall, quota students have a lower evasion rate than their peers (Marques, 2008). Some studies analyzed different experiences; these are very important, but mostly punctual. The ProUni website itself brings personal examples, along with news and photographs. Given the magnitude of resources invested and the time period, the program has been in place—enough for the graduation of several cohorts in different courses, more studies with a “macro” focus are necessary.

Neves (2009) had pinpointed the lack of information about the ProUni as one of the causes of discriminatory attitudes against grantees. Carvalho’s (2011) study lent further support to this argument by suggesting that grantees felt that they were more discriminated against by their peers than by professors or staff. The latter has possibly more information about how the program works, compared to the non-grantee students who can only see a difference between those who pay and those who do not. This author has carried out a preliminary assessment of the program and remarked as potential positive effects a greater control by the Ministry of Education over the deployment of resources stemming from the Union’s tax reliefs. Before the ProUni, the institution allocated these resources according to its own criteria. Another positive aspect is the use
of the students’ performance in ENEM as a merit-based criterion. The study has also pointed to pedagogical and financial limitations to inclusion through the ProUni and questioned the program’s social and political macro-effects.

By comparing grantees in more and in less competitive courses in a private university, Estacia (2009) showed that the chance of ProUni grantees to enroll in higher education encouraged them to dream of having better opportunities, not only in the job market but also in the academic field.

The greater diversity brought about by the higher enrollment of students from groups that did not have access to higher education posed a major challenge for both public and private higher education institutions, in terms of how to appropriately receive these new students. If the distribution of resources through the ProUni takes into account the academic quality of the private sector courses for which it deploys the grants, there will be benefits both to the students and to the country at large, since the private sector has a capillarity of supply that is not found in the public sector even taking into account the recent expansion policies.

By providing a space so that poor, black, native, disabled and public school students have greater opportunities to continue studying, the Brazilian higher education system encourages diversity and welcomes representatives of groups that have been virtually absent from higher education. These policies are in tune with the Federal Law No. 10,861, which underscores the centrality of affirmative action in Brazilian universities, and points to social inclusion as a constitutive element in the assessment of higher education institutions. The country will ultimately benefit from a poll of professionals with a view of reality that is closer to that of most Brazilians.

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