

BRAZIL: Student quotas - the policy debate

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The Brazilian Congress is discussing a bill requiring federal higher education institutions to introduce a 50% quota for poor, non-white applicants who are public school graduates. The bill addresses the issue that these students lack the opportunity to attend the best, mostly private, secondary schools and are disadvantaged when they sit for the entrance examinations of the top public universities in the country. It does not represent the first project for social inclusion in higher education in Brazil.

For some years, private higher education institutions have been able to obtain tax relief if they admit a certain number of students who pay no tuition or pay half the tuition rate. Many public universities have also created their own affirmative programmes.

In 2009, there are about 5.8 million students in higher education in Brazil, 75% in private institutions. These students comprise about 13% of the 18-24 age group - the net enrolment rate - according to data provided by the National Household Survey of 2007.

One of the main reasons for the low net enrolment is that 40% of the people in that age bracket have not completed secondary education. The quality of secondary schools, particularly in the public sector, is very low, and many applicants cannot pass the entrance examinations for the programmes of their choice. About half the students in higher education are older and study in the evening.

Public higher education is free, and most of the best and more prestigious programmes and institutions are public. The cost per student in federal higher education institutions equals around US\$10,000 a year, by far the highest in Latin America. Most graduate education and research takes place in a number of (but not only) public universities.

Competition to enter the prestigious careers of medicine, dentistry, engineering and law in these institutions can be fierce, with dozens of applicants per place, selected through written examinations. Expensive private secondary schools and cramming pre-university courses prepare the students who can pay for the exams. Thus, only students from richer, better-educated families get the necessary training and eventually enter these careers.

For students from other social backgrounds, the alternative options are less-competitive careers in public universities - teaching, social work, nursing and others - or the private sector, which provides evening, non-demanding programmes in administration, pedagogy, and other 'soft' fields with affordable tuition fees.

Arguments for quotas

This situation, however, is changing, with strong pressures and incentives from government and social movements for public universities to expand and admit more students, and a new trend to create elite private institutions, particularly in fields such as economics, business administration and law.

Today, 35% of students in public institutions have family incomes under about US\$300, compared with 25% in private institutions and 47% for the population as a whole. The national minimum wage (about US\$200 per month) is established each year by the federal government and is mandatory for all labour contracts.

Most secondary school students in Brazil (83%) attend public institutions. In higher education, however, 60% of students come from private schools. These figures show that many students who would benefit from the bill are already in higher education, and many more are likely to be admitted as the system expands.

The most controversial aspect of the bill is the racial component, because it is entangled with a prolonged and sometimes bitter debate about racial identity and prejudice in Brazil.

The Brazilian statistical office has traditionally asked people to classify themselves in terms of their colour (white, black, yellow and *pardo* - meaning to have dark skin, between white and black), with the 'yellow' category being now divided into indigenous and Oriental. In the 2007 household survey, 49.4% of people considered themselves white, 42.3% *pardos*, 7.4% black, 0.5% yellow, and 0.3% of indigenous origin.

Given the high historical levels of miscegenation in the country, the boundaries between these categories are very fuzzy, and many whites would probably be classified as black in countries with more well-defined ethnic boundaries, such as the United States or South Africa.

In spite of that, statistical analyses show consistently that *pardos* and blacks are economically more impaired than whites, and that blacks are worse off than *pardos* in terms of educational attainment. Social and racial prejudice in Brazil, however, is combined with high levels of intermarriage and conviviality between people of various racial appearances. Education and the quality of jobs, and not race differences, explain the main social and economic differences in the country.

Supporters of race-based affirmative action in Brazil tend to lump the *pardo* and black categories in one group, which would include about half of the Brazilian population.

As access to education has increased, the proportion of whites and non-whites in basic and secondary education in Brazil has become similar to that in the population as a whole. In higher education, the proportion of non-whites has grown from 22% in 2001 to 32% in 2007. In public institutions, the proportion is 38% and it is 30% in the private sector.

The various quota bills under discussion require that 50% of places in programmes at public higher education institutions should be filled in by underprivileged students. None of the suggested policies, however, take into account most of these students' inadequate academic requirements to complete the more demanding programmes.

If the legislation were enacted, it is likely that a large number of students would drop out, or public institutions might lower their standards, increasing the exodus of richer and better-educated students to the private sector.

The quota bill would bring to public institutions a few hundred thousand students from a lower social background, displacing others who might also stand at the bottom of the entrance examination rankings. Social inequities within the higher education system would not change much, but high-quality programmes and institutions could be affected by the forced admission of students unable to keep up with their standards.

Ongoing problems

To make higher education in Brazil more equitable requires improving the quality and reach of secondary education, which would depend, in turn, on improving the equally precarious system of basic education.

In the meantime, controversies surrounding the quota bill have led to neglect of the main issues concerning higher education in Brazil. Creating an effective differentiated system would provide alternatives for students with dissimilar backgrounds and needs.

The system must protect high-quality programmes from pressures to lower standards. Funding will be required for deserving students who need financial support, while tuition should be charged from those who can pay at public universities. A range of policies are necessary for public and private institutions to improve their quality and to more effectively use the public resources they receive.

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