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THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRAZIL*

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The modernization of Brazilian economy and society cannot be achieved without adequate educational policies. It will not be possible to build a modern, internationally competitive economy, capable of incorporating and developing new technologies, productive processes and organizational methods, with a semi-illiterate population, a deteriorated secondary education and a higher education sector in permanent state of crisis. The Brazilian Government has a diagnostic about the country's economy problems – inflation, low productivity and overprotection of the industrial sector, uncontrolled public expenditures – and conviction about the policies needed to redress them. There is no consensus about the ways the government is tackling these problems, but there is a broad understanding that they point to the right direction. There is no similar consensus in the field of education, neither within the government nor among opposition parties and sectors.

This article deals with higher education, and intends to discuss its perspectives in a time horizon of ten to twenty years. It assumes that a good higher education sector is indispensable for scientific and technological development, for increasing the quality of human capital and for the upgrading of general education in a country. Basic education, which all agree is the priority, cannot be improved at the expense of public support to higher education.

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Current situation

Brazil has about 1.5 million students in higher education institutions, corresponding to around 13% of the age cohort, enrolled in 83 universities, 720 independent schools and 67 federations throughout the country. Most students are in private, and half in non-university institutions¹. The current legislation governing higher education is from 1968, when total enrollment was about three hundred thousand. The 1968 reform was an attempt to copy the American model, through the introduction of graduate education, the credit system, departmental organization and the assumption that the whole sector would evolve toward a uniform model of research universities. This system was supposed to replace the old model based on professional “faculties” (whether joined in universities or not), leading to nationally recognized degrees. The number of students underwent a rapid expansion in the 1970’s, coinciding with a period of economic growth and urbanization, and has stagnated since the early 1980s (table 2). Most of the expansion occurred in private, non-university, non-research institutions, moving the system further and further away from the model underlying the 1968 legislation. It is possible to describe the current state of higher education in terms of how it carries the different roles it is supposed to play in a modern society:

Table I – Brazil, Enrollment in higher education by type of institution and legal authority, 1988.

	Type of institution		total
	university	non-university	
Legal authority			
Federal	304,465	13,366	317,831 21.1%
State	129,785	60,951	190,736 12.7%
County	17,178	59,606	76,784 5.1%
Private	328,812	599,397	918,209 51.2%
Total	770,240 51.2%	733,330 48.8%	1,503,560

Source: Calculated with data from Ministério da Educação, Serviço de Estatística da Educação e Cultura (ME/SEEC), 1988.

¹ Data from the Ministry of Education, 1988. “Independent” schools are institutions teaching one or a few courses, such as Law, or economics. Federations are independent schools under the same administration, but without university status. The difference between university and non-university institutions affect some of their administrative and academic prerogatives, but not the degrees granted to the students, which are equal from a legal point of view.

Education for the liberal professions (law, medicine, dentistry, engineering). This is the more traditional sector of higher education in Brazil. Teaching is organized around independent “schools”, or faculties, many of them dating from years before the creation of Brazil’s first universities in the 1930’s. The more traditional schools have maintained high degrees of independence within the universities in spite of the centralizing tendencies built into the 1968 reform; they have also kept small the number of students admitted every year. Data for 1988 show that 36% of the applicants to higher education institutions tried to get into these professions, which had only 16% of the places, and graduated 22% of the students in the previous year as indicated in table 3².

The relative ability of many courses in the traditional professions to resist the reorganization of the 1968 reform and the effects of massification preserved some of their traditional qualities, which does not mean that they were not affected. As demand increased, new courses were created with lower standards, catering to students coming from lower social and academic backgrounds, while the classic model of the liberal professions began to give way to new forms of salaried work for medical doctors, engineers, lawyers and similar activities. This is clear in the medical professions, with the scarcity of high paying private clients, the expansion of social welfare and the establishment of private health companies, which provide today the bulk of the working opportunities in the health sector³, similar tendencies are likely to be occurring in other fields.

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² Data from the Serviço de Estatística da Educação e Cultura, Ministry of Education, recodified. The division among different types of careers was based only on the courses’ denominations. A private publication, *Guia do Estudante* (São Paulo, Editora Abril, 1990) lists 90 institutions with providing post-secondary technical courses, 38 of which in the state of Estado de São Paulo, and 60 in the field of data processing.

³ See Maria Cecília Donnângelo, editor, *Condições do Exercício Profissional de Medicina na Área Metropolitana de São Paulo*, Universidade de São Paulo, Departamento de Medicina Preventiva, 1983, mimeo.

There is some consensus that the quality of these courses has come down in the last several years, although it is difficult to substantiate it. One consequence of the resistance of traditional schools to the 1968 reform is that few of them can boast today significant research activities. With a few exceptions, most of their professors are part-time practitioners, even in the best schools of dentistry and medicine, and more so in the schools of law and engineering⁴. In spite of the country's obvious need for health professionals and engineers, the market for their skills has stagnated, and there is a strong pressure from professional corporations against the creation of new courses or the establishment of short-term specializations.

Table III – Brazil, applicants, places and diplomas granted by types of career.

	“Traditional” professions ¹	“New” professions ²	Vocational courses ³
applicants	36%	60%	4%
places	16%	80%	4%
diplomas	22%	76%	2%

1 – Medicine, Law, Dentistry, Engineering.

2 – All careers except the traditional and the vocational ones. Includes the social sciences, humanities, literature and teaching education.

3 - Includes, among others, interior decoration, translation, hotel management, dance, electric maintenance, secretary, data processing and several courses on applied industrial technology.

Source: ME/SEEC, 1988

Elite education. In the 19th century, Brazilian elites used to send their children to the law schools and, to a lesser degree, to the schools of medicine and engineering in the cities of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador and Recife. The richest sent their sons to Portugal, and later to France. The opportunities for cultural life, political contacts and the creation of personal networks in the cities compensated for the usually low quality of the education received in the schools. Once graduated, the young bachelors moved quickly into high public offices, started political careers or took responsibility for the management of their family's property and business.

⁴ Data for the Universidade de São Paulo, the leading academic research institution in the country, are telling. In the Law School only 13% of the professors had full-time contracts in 1989. There are large differences among schools of medicine and engineering depending on whether they are located in the city of São Paulo or in a small campus in the state's interior. In the medical school in São Paulo 32% of the professors had full-time contracts, as against 90% in the Faculdade de Medicina de Ribeirão Preto. The Escola Politécnica (engineering) had 54% of its professors with full-time contracts, compared with 79% in the Engineering School in São Carlos 79%. For the three dentistry schools belonging to the Universidade de São Paulo in São Paulo, Bauru and Ribeirão Preto, the percentages are 21%, 76% e 62%, respectively.

The gradual expansion of higher education in this century diluted this function of elite formation and increased the regional character of higher education institutions, while the professional and scientific content of many institutions slowly improved. The federal universities that exist today in all state capitals (and the state universities in São Paulo) are natural passage points for the local elites, but have not kept the prestigious images that surrounded that law schools of São Paulo and Pernambuco, or the engineering school in Rio de Janeiro of last century. There is nothing in Brazil in Brazil occupying the places of the French *Grandes Écoles*, the Ivy League in the United States or Tokyo University in Japan. Some institutions in São Paulo, like the more traditional units of the Universidade de São Paulo or business school at Fundação Getúlio Vargas, play a similar role at the state level. The Instituto Tecnológico da Aeronáutica, an engineering school maintained by the Air Force in São José dos Campos, was the elite institution for the education of scientific and entrepreneurial leadership in the 1950s and 1960s, a place that it seemed to have lost in the last twenty years.

There has been some recent attempts to recreate this role of national elite formation, but without success; The José Sarney government created a National School of Administration in Brasília, trying to copy the French *École National d'Administration*, a project that seems to have attracted the interest of some circles in the current Collor government. The promise that the students graduating from this school would be hired to top positions in public administration attracted at first many candidates, which were frustrated in their hopes. It does not seem possible to establish a *grande école* in the city of Brasília, within the public bureaucracy, when most of the talent is in universities outside the capital⁵. The other attempt is that of the Universidade de Campinas, a public institution in the state of São Paulo, which is going forward in a drive to recruit its students nationally, to upgrade its faculty and establish itself as the country's leading research university. There is little doubt that the Universidade de Campinas has a better chance of becoming a national center for elite education than any project carried on by the Federal Government in Brasília.

General Education. Brazilian Higher education followed the tradition of continental Europe – mostly French and Italian -, of professional qualification of a small elite. Until the

⁵ This school of administration was an obvious attempt to reproduce in broader scale the experience of the Instituto Rio Branco, the prestigious school of diplomacy maintained by the foreign service. There is no published evaluation of the Instituto Rio Branco, besides its reputation. The quality of the foreign service is much higher than most other sectors of Brazilian public administration, and the institute has had a central role in the recruitment and socialization of diplomats. But the Institute does not have the same standing as the best graduate programs in political science, economics, administration or history, and the exclusive reliance on graduates from the Instituto Rio Branco deprives the diplomatic corps from recruiting

fifties, it was still possible for the elite to attend public and private secondary schools of good quality, and to be a teacher on one of these schools was a prestigious activity. Secondary education was considered enough for most sectors of the middle and high classes, and particularly for women. Middle-level education was stratified between the traditional secondary schools, with a curriculum based on the humanities and the sciences and leading to the universities, and a variety of vocational courses leading to mid-level professional activities that were never properly organized or financed, and tended to be perceived as of poor quality and low prestige⁶. The expansion of higher education opportunities helps to explain both the rapid growth and the loss of quality and content of secondary general education. As the number of students flocked to the secondary schools in search for a passage into the universities, their curricula turned into mere rituals of memorization and rote learning, most of the traditional content disappeared (Latin, French, and Philosophy disappeared, and History and Geography turned into social studies, of dubious substance), while the best teachers moved to the best paying jobs in higher education institutions or to other activities.

The decadence of secondary schools as the place for general education could be compensated by the transference of this function to the tertiary level, as it happened with the colleges in the United States. The large number of humanities and social science courses that emerged in the seventies fulfilled somehow this role, by increasing the years of school attendance for youngsters from the middle classes. Yet, these courses never adopted general education as their explicit goal, and strived to offer professional degrees, which are the expected outcome of all higher education in Brazil. Such degrees never had much prestige or market value, leading to role ambiguities that left most of these courses with high levels of anonymity, lack of motivation and disrepute. In consequence, there is practically no place where a student can get good quality general education today, except perhaps in a few, isolated private secondary schools.

⁶ The last comprehensive reform of secondary education dates from 1942, when a sharp distinction was made between the curriculum for general education, with two options (humanistic, or “classic”, and scientific) leading to the universities, and the professional education for middle-level professions in industry, agriculture and trade. Of those, only the latter was organized in a significant scale, recruiting students from the lower middle classes to “escolas de comércio” (schools of commerce). Later, legislation was passed granting all students with secondary school level degrees the right to apply to higher education institutions. See S Schwartzman, Helena Bomeny e Vanda Costa, *Tempos de Capanema, Paz e Terra / EDUSP*, 1984, page 188. For a broad view of secondary education, see Geraldo Bastos Silva, *A Educação Secundária*, São Paulo, Editora Nacional (Atualidades Pedagógicas, vol. 94), 1969.

Education for the “new professions”. The difficulties of access and professionalization in the traditional liberal careers, added to the lack of proper general education