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Forging Radical Alternatives in Higher Education: The Case of Brazil

Tristan McCowan
UCL IoE, London, UK

Abstract *In recent years, new forms of higher education have emerged that challenge many of our assumptions about what a university is. In Brazil there has been a particular flowering of these alternative universities, on account of the wave of popular mobilisation following the end of the military dictatorship, aided by political support from the centre. These new institutions are characterised by distinctive aims or missions, whether relating to a particular ethnic or cultural group, a social or political movement, regional unity and intercultural exchange, or a spiritual calling. This article assesses the role and prospects of these institutions and analyses the ways in which they have positioned themselves in relation to the mainstream. The two factors of resources and recognition are found to be critical elements in ensuring their viability and success. However, dependence on funders and conformity with accreditation requirements also constrain the possibilities of embodying their distinctive vision. Finally, broader implications are drawn out for understandings of educational institutions, in light of Illich's deschooling critique.*

Keywords Alternative universities; Brazil; deschooling; higher education reform; institutional theory

Introduction

The work of Ivan Illich is unsparing in its critique of conventional educational practice. He went beyond the—now commonplace—unveiling of the hidden curriculum of schools and its role in the reproduction of socio-economic inequalities, to point to an even deeper and more pernicious problem: the very existence of an "institution" of learning. For Illich (1971), the issue was not just that schools were failing on the meritocratic dream of enabling social mobility for all, but that they were squeezing out meaningful learning—for everybody, and not just those at the bottom of the pile. Institutionalisation of education was seen to lead to reliance on expert teachers and the consequent undermining of people's faith in

their ability to learn for themselves and from each other. Most dangerously, the process perpetuated its survival into the future in an inexorable cycle, with each generation having to send its children through the same soul-less procession of grades so as to ensure that they obtain the qualifications needed to earn a livelihood.

While some may consider these questions now buried along with the neo-Marxist critiques of the same period, there is an enduring relevance to Illich's account of institutionalisation. Despite the continuing expansion of formal education systems, concerns over obsession with qualifications and testing—raised in Ronald Dore's *Diploma Disease* (1976)—continue unabated, while attention has now been drawn to the cultural imperialism of the Western-style schooling being spread globally through the UNESCO-led "Education for All" initiative. Even in high-income countries there are worries about the limitations of formal education in fostering creativity such that education anywhere becomes problematic, whatever its resource base. What is more, the possibilities of responding to these concerns and fulfilling Illich's ideals of peer learning and conviviality have been vastly increased with developments in information and communications technologies, particularly the internet. In other words, do we need the "provided" institutions these days?

In higher education, new modes of learning linked to technologies have been particularly prominent. With the phenomenal expansion of enrolments in tertiary education in recent decades—now reaching 32.88% gross enrolment ratio globally (UIS, 2015)—it would at first sight appear that the "university"[1] as institution is secure. Nevertheless, there are signs of a lingering, or perhaps a new, scepticism about this institution. This sceptical current is motored by the ideal of the Silicon Valley innovator, untroubled by formal qualifications, and sees higher education as much as an impediment as a facilitator of developing a successful start-up business. The emergence of online courses, in particular MOOCs—and the challenges they pose to the university as a physical space, as a validator of knowledge and a community of scholars—along with the entry of new for-profit providers offering pared-down value-for-money tuition, have led to a process some have termed the "unbundling" of the traditional university (Barber, Donnelly & Rizvi, 2013; MacFarlane 2011; McCowan 2016). Furthermore, there are those who argue that young people are better off not going to university at all, and initiatives such as the Thiel Fellowship and *Uncollege.org* in the US support young people to pursue other avenues.

These developments undoubtedly present a challenge to the conventional institution of university. However, there is an important distinction between these

[1] Tertiary education customarily includes a range of non-university institutions, including polytechnics, single discipline faculties and teacher education colleges. This article will not focus on the specific differences between these types.

changes and the original ideas of Illich—along with those of others who developed the deschooling thesis in association with him (e.g., Reimer, 1971; Prakash & Esteva, 2008)—namely, the value attached to equality. The original critique of schooling was one rooted in the institution's regressive effects on equality in society, and the potential of a deschooled society for upholding social justice; the new deschoolers, on the other hand, have as their arch-virtue "innovation," understood to a large extent as the creation of new products that will be successful in the market, and will bring success to their creators within a capitalist economy.

This article focuses on forms of alternative to conventional higher education that adhere to Illich's egalitarian principle. Often associated with indigenous groups, political and social movements, NGOs and radical educators, these institutions represent fundamentally different ways of viewing the aims of higher education, the basis of valid knowledge, the role of the lecturer, forms of governance, and indeed the nature of the institution itself. They are "radical" in the sense that they aim to get to the root of the educational and social problems of the contemporary world, and challenge and transform core aspects of these spheres, rather than "tinker" around the edges, bringing mild and incremental reform (Teamey & Mandel, 2014). For example, UNITIERRA (University of the Land) in southern Mexico is an institution with no entry requirements and no formal qualifications on exit, and which functions through a combination of seminars and workshops, and pairing of "students" with professional mentors in the workplace (Esteva, 2007, November). There are diverse examples of alternative universities around the world, from Denmark's Højskolerne (http://danishfolkhighschools.com) to Lincoln's co-operative Social Science Centre (http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/), Swaraj University (India), Gaia University (international), Schumacher College (UK) and the University of the Third Age (international). Importantly, these initiatives involve not only the development of alternative *means* for achieving the aims of higher education (for example new modes of delivery), but question and reframe the very *ends* of the endeavour.

For the most part these initiatives are responding to broadly recognised concerns about inequitable access, irrelevant curricula, restricted epistemological perspectives, poor graduate outcomes and ineffective governance, accompanying the recent rapid expansion of higher education systems, particularly in low and middle-income countries. However, instead of proposing reform efforts at the national and institutional levels within the mainstream system, the alternative universities have involved the creation of entirely new *forms* of institution. These institutions are significant not only in providing solutions to the problems outlined above, but also in challenging our very conception of a university and opening new possibilities of developments for the future. However, as will be explored further below, they also encounter a range of significant problems in achieving their aims and ensuring their very survival.

In providing an analysis of some examples of these alternative universities, this article focuses specifically on the case of Brazil, a country in which the political conditions are conducive to this form of experimentation: combining a decentralised education system with opportunity for innovation at the local level, some financial support from the state (at least until the recent economic downturn and political upheaval), and strong civil society organisations and social movements campaigning for educational alternatives. Such conditions have led to the emergence of a number of innovations at all levels of the education system, ones which have intrinsic interest and value for educational practitioners and researchers worldwide, but which also provide a useful context in which to analyse the dynamics of educational alternatives. The present article does not attempt to provide an exhaustive list of alternative higher education institutions in the country, or to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of the higher education system, but to explore the theoretical questions of institutionalisation through selected cases.

The aims of this study are threefold. First, it documents a range of examples of alternative institutions so as to provide an account of their characteristics and to contribute to the mapping of these institutions worldwide, in the context of a significant lack of research in the area. Second, the article analyses their potential and their prospects for survival and success, focusing on the fundamental preconditions of *resources* and *recognition*, and the dangers that compromises made to ensure their practical viability may pose to the embodiment of their mission. Last, implications are drawn out for theoretical debates around institutionalisation of education, and for Illich's proposal for deschooling. This is an exploratory qualitative study, investigating theoretical concerns from the literature within an empirical context, as well as generating new theoretical ideas from the themes emerging from the data collected. The study draws on documentary and web sources, as well as institutional visits and interviews with academic staff, senior leadership, creators and activists of the institutions, carried out between 2011 and 2015. Interviews were transcribed and analysed in Portuguese, and the quotations appearing in this article are the author's translation; while the real names of the initiatives have been used so as to enable contextual understanding, all respondents remain anonymous.

The specific question addressed in relation to the third of the aims outlined above is that of how institutionalisation affects the process of radical reform. Veiga poses the following challenge in relation to the purpose of higher education:

> What is required is an entirely different form of inquiry and learning. It is a life-long process of inner growth that only gradually culminates in knowledge with the power to transform individual human existence. (Veiga, 2012, p. 169)

But is this vision possible within the mainstream? Does the existence of an institution of higher education ultimately militate against the creation of real alternatives for meaningful learning? And if so, can initiatives survive and prosper outside of this institutional framework? What is to be gained and lost by operating inside or outside the mainstream? In order to answer these questions, cases have been selected to represent three types of institution: those within the mainstream, those outside of it, and those with a liminal existence between the two.

As explored in Huisman, Norgård, Rasmussen & Stensaker (2002), existing theories of institutional change predict different possible trajectories for alternative universities. On the one hand, neo-institutional approaches predict a gradual merging back to the norm, whether through coercive, mimetic or normative isomorphism. On the other hand, critics of these approaches present different scenarios, asserting that there are "ways for universities to be and stay different from the idea of the traditional university" (Huisman et al, 2002, p. 318). These dynamics of movement towards and away from the norm will be explored in the cases that follow. However, there will not be extensive engagement with the analytical frameworks of institutional theory; instead, the focus will be on the more normative ideas of Illich and others who assert the desirability, and even the necessity, of the construction of learning opportunities outside mainstream institutions. Not all of the cases covered in this article exemplify attempts to "deschool," but they nevertheless represent sites for exploring the implications of institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation for radical reform.

Illich's critique, in fact, goes beyond education to encompass the entirety of modern industrial societies and their conceptions of "development." For Illich, the problem with institutions is that they undermine people's confidence in themselves and destroy *conviviality*. This latter concept is central to Illich's work, signifying the

> autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence… (Illich, 1973, p. 18)

In the sphere of education, Illich sees conviviality as being achieved not by institutional forms, but only through webs of interaction that will lead to unfettered access to learning. Institutions undermine these elements in the first place through the creation of experts, who define what is legitimate to learn, then deliver and certify it, and safeguard their own position by delegitimising the claims of others. Commodification is another aspect of institutionalisation, in this case in packaging

knowledge for the purpose of sale and thereby cutting off its lifeblood in the organic relationships of learning between human beings. As Finger and Asún (2001, p. 10) state: "[I]nstitutions create the needs and control their satisfaction, and, by so doing, turn the human being and her or his creativity into objects."

The ultimate consequence of institutionalisation for Illich is counterproductivity, through which instead of promoting the good it is intended to support, an institution ends up working against it: "When an enterprise grows beyond a certain point on this scale, it first frustrates the end for which it was originally designed, and then rapidly becomes a threat to society itself." (Illich, 1973, pp. 4-5). The analysis presented in this article then focuses on the ways in which initiatives challenge (or accommodate themselves to) the seductive but constraining process of institutionalisation, and seek to provide a space for the flourishing of conviviality and meaningful learning.

An initial task is to define what is meant by "alternative" in this context. Clearly, alternative is a relational concept, in this case relative to what might be considered the standard or mainstream form of higher education institution (HEI). While of course there is significant diversity of HEIs even within specific countries, we can identify some salient common characteristics in, for example, admissions requirements based on academic merit, courses leading to a nationally recognised diploma at undergraduate or postgraduate level, the division of courses into recognised academic fields or professional areas, and the existence of academic staff specialising in research and teaching in their academic field. An alternative institution, therefore, would be one in which either one or more of these common features is significantly departed from, providing a challenge to conventional conceptions of access, curriculum and governance[2]. Of course, in this sense it is wrong to think about a dichotomy of alternative and "traditional" universities. Instead, institutions locate themselves along a continuum and sometimes with a complex interplay of different elements.

Of course, readers may justifiably question whether these institutions are really "universities" at all, and there may be other labels such as "adult education" that some may prefer to assign. In fact, in some cases this is exactly the effect intended by the proponents, to apply the term "university" in an unusual context, so as to challenge, subvert and in some cases satirise the concept. This was the case of Tent City University, for example, established during the Occupy Movement in London in 2011, which was a large open-fronted tent with a mini-library, providing

[2] This article will not follow the distinctive usage of the term "alternative provider" in the UK, referring to new private entrants into the higher education system (many of which are for-profit), that have joined the established universities and further education colleges in offering degree courses.

a space for talks from invited speakers, workshops and discussion groups open to those involved in the occupation and the general public.

Before addressing the characteristics of these alternative institutions, there will first be a brief background discussion of higher education in Brazil.

Higher Education in Brazil

Brazil is unusual in the contemporary period for having a stark division between public and private sectors in higher education. Public universities—whether federal or state run institutions—are entirely free-of-charge for students, but have highly restrictive admissions policies based on competitive public examinations. Private universities on the other hand have ample spaces, but charge fees on a broad scale from low-prestige economical institutions to high-ranking expensive ones. The private sector has since the 1990s absorbed the considerable demand for higher education from growing numbers of secondary school leavers, and now accounts for 74% of undergraduate enrolments (Carvalho, 2006; McCowan, 2004; INEP, 2014; Sampaio, 2014). Approximately half of the private sector is for-profit, being an extremely lucrative sector for investors, with the largest higher education companies having significant holdings on the Brazilian stock exchange. There are also a number of religious universities in Brazil—most important of which are the Catholic universities (*Pontifícia Universidade Católica*, PUC)—that are distinct from the for-profit sector in their ethos and range of activities, and have a greater resemblance to the public universities in terms of their research and community engagement.

Despite the rapid expansion of access in Brazil—with undergraduate enrolment increasing from 3 million in 2001 to over 7 million in 2013—the net enrolment rate is still only 15% (INEP, 2013), with lower-income students excluded for the most part from both public and private institutions. Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of income distribution, and these inequalities are reflected in the higher education system. Racial/ethnic background is also a significant factor in higher education access, with African Brazilians and indigenous peoples having disproportionately low rates of enrolment. These questions have been addressed through a range of policies—most dramatically the 2011 law obliging federal universities to have a 50% quota for students from public schools and from disadvantaged racial groups[3]—yet inequalities remain acute.

In terms of the curriculum, the country is characterised by a high degree of "classification" in Bernstein's (1971) conception, with few cross-disciplinary courses, and with the exception of the recent initiatives outlined below, little in the way of a liberal arts model. In spite of theoretical influence of thinkers such as

[3] Within the 50% quota, the proportions of students entering must be in line with the racial/ethnic composition of the state in question.

Paulo Freire, pedagogy in universities also remains predominantly traditional, with emphasis on knowledge transmission through lecturing. The new private universities offer mainly evening courses for working students, operating on what could be described as a "high school" model, with little in the way of independent study and broader campus experience. In terms of management, while private institutions follow a corporate model, public institutions are highly democratic as regards selection of office-holders—with rectors elected by staff and students—although their operations and funding are regimented by the national legal framework. Public institutions also have a strong commitment to community engagement and public benefit more broadly, a legacy of the reforms at the University of Córdoba in 1918 that influenced universities across the region (Bernasconi, 2007; Figueiredo-Cowen, 2002).

More broadly, Brazil has been the site for a range of radical experiments, socially and educationally, since the ending in 1985 of two decades of military dictatorship. This period has seen the emergence of strong mobilisations of trade unions, indigenous peoples, African descendants and many other social movements, in addition to the founding of the Workers' Party (PT[4]) which has brought significant changes to the country since the election of Lula da Silva in 2002 (Gandin, 2006; Ghanem, 2013; King-Calnek, 2006; McCowan, 2009; Singer, 2016). These movements have interacted strongly with the field of education, calling for expanded access for disadvantaged groups as well as transformation of curriculum and governance in schools and universities. A number of the initiatives below have emerged directly or indirectly from these broader social movements.

Initiatives Within the Mainstream System

This first section addresses experimentation within the mainstream, focusing on a small number of institutions in Brazil, within both public and private sectors, that retain most of the features of conventional institutions—and so are far from Illich's ideal of deschooling—but nevertheless innovate in particular ways. These operate within the legal framework of higher education institutions and accreditation, using the conventional sources of funding, but present innovations in relation to curriculum, access and governance.

The thematic federal universities

In response to the stagnation of the public sector in higher education since the 1990s, the Lula government instigated a programme known as *Reuni*[5], which implemented a range of measures to increase the number of places available in

[4] Partido dos Trabalhadores.

[5] Programa de Apoio a Planos de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais.

public institutions. Alongside this programme, a number of new federal institutions have been created, amongst which a small number of *thematic* universities, focusing on a distinctive remit or mission. The creation of these institutions was spurred on by social movements campaigning for the rights of specific groups, as well as by broader movements within the government and ruling Workers' Party to transform federal universities. The latter movements targeted the highly restricted access in these institutions—introducing more equitable forms of entrance requirements, including use of the national secondary leaving examination *Enem,* in place of the institution-specific *vestibular* examinations, which favoured those students who could afford preparatory courses. Changes to the narrow disciplinary nature of the curriculum were also targeted by introducing a liberal arts conception through ideas of the *Universidade Nova* (New University), as seen in the Federal University of Southern Bahia (Santos & Almeida Filho, 2008; Tavares & Romão, 2015).

The most prominent of these new institutions is the University of Latin American Integration[6] (UNILA). Founded in 2010 in the symbolic location of the triple border of Brazil with Paraguay and Argentina near the Iguaçu Falls, the institution aims to provide a space for teaching, research and community service linked not to the national context but to pan-Latin American concerns (Comissão de Implantação da UNILA, 2009a, 2009b; Trindade, 2009).

While funded entirely by the Brazilian government, the aim is for it to be a bilingual institution (Portuguese and Spanish, with some limited engagement with indigenous languages too) and to have half of the student and staff body from other countries in Latin America. By 2015 there were 2,300 undergraduate students, 1,400 of whom were Brazilian, with the remaining students from Bolivia, Paraguay, Haiti, Ecuador, Uruguay, Argentina and Colombia (Soares, 2015, May). The curriculum offered is distinct from conventional universities, through the emphasis on interdisciplinarity, the "common cycle" of Latin American studies that all students undergo in their first year, and the pan-Latin American focus of the specific degree courses, including Latin American Cultural Diversity, Rural Development and Food Security, and Engineering for Sustainable Energy. In line with its interdisciplinary focus, the university has moved away from the traditional faculties and departments towards centres of interdisciplinary studies.

The university also has a social justice agenda, aiming to serve the local population which would not normally have access to a federal institution (many of the inhabitants of Foz de Iguaçu are descendants of the migrant workers who built the Itaipú dam), as well as maintaining a range of community engagement activities. In their study on UNILA, Motter and Gandin (2016) highlight the distinctiveness of the institution in reverting the dominant forms of internationalisation in higher education globally, promoting South-South cooperation and engaging with

[6] Universidade Federal da Integração Latino-Americana.

neighbouring and more distant countries in a spirit of solidarity rather than income generation or competition. While certainly not rejecting all aspects of institutional education, UNILA does resist and provide an alternative to the commodification that was a source of concern for Illich (1971).

UNILA has nevertheless encountered a range of challenges. In spite of constitutional guarantees of autonomy to the sector, as a federal university it exists within a set of strongly defined legal and academic boundaries. Senior managers and lecturers interviewed by the author in 2011 all pointed to tensions between the political forces that had given rise to the university and the needs of the institution in terms of achieving its mission. The job security, prestige and relatively generous remuneration makes working in a federal university highly attractive to early career academics, but there is no guarantee that those applying for the posts will genuinely buy into the vision of pan-Latin American solidarity, or have the appropriate knowledge and experience. As one lecturer stated:

> I don't have a very refined political sense, maybe because my discipline is biology. So I still have a bit of difficulty in understanding this sphere of Latin America. One of the problems here at UNILA is exactly this: not even the lecturers really know what Latin America is.

Conversely, the relatively remote location of the university in relation to the population centres of Brazil has in some cases made it hard to attract the experienced staff required. Other challenges include the fact that the university does not have control over selection of students from the other countries so cannot ensure the same principles of equity are applied. Bureaucratic barriers include difficulties of contracting visiting professors from other countries in Latin America, and recognition of diplomas across the region, as well as accreditation of new and experimental areas of study. An example of these constraints was given by a member of the senior leadership team:

> In Brazil, to buy a product we have to get three quotes. Take a book about "Political crisis in the new regional parties in Peru," which for some reason we want to get. It doesn't exist in Brazil. How are you going to get three quotes for this from northern Peru?

Empirical research with students shows that there are also challenges in relation to the integration of the multi-national student body, the balanced use of different languages and unevenness of academic preparation between the different countries (Vianna & McCowan, 2012). Respondents also pointed to anxiety in the students at undertaking only generic courses in the first year and not being able to focus on their chosen discipline until the second year. Finally, there are significant cost

implications in funding the non-Brazilian students, particularly in terms of maintaining the generous support package of accommodation and other services.

Created at a similar time to UNILA was another thematic university, this time with a focus on Africa. The University of Lusophone Afro-Brazilian International Integration (UNILAB[7]) is aimed at articulation with the Portuguese speaking countries of Africa, primarily: Angola, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, but with links to other Portuguese speaking countries, such as East Timor. The location[8] of the university is again symbolic, in this case in Redenção, Ceará, in the impoverished north-east of Brazil, the first city in the country to abolish slavery in 1883. Like UNILA, it aims to have half of its students from Brazil and half from overseas, funded by the Brazilian government. Aware of the dangers of brain drain, provisions are in place to ensure the relocation of the overseas students back to their countries of origin, and their insertion in areas of work beneficial to local development. Not only does the university aim to strengthen links between Brazil and Africa, but also to provide a focal point for engagement with African cultures and history within Brazil. Courses and research again are focused on themes of relevance to inclusive development in all of the countries: research groups include Agro-Ecology and Organic Produce; Popular Education, Micro-Finance and Solidary Economy, and African Thought and Philosophy. Unusually for Brazil, students undertake a third term each year engaging in interdisciplinary academic, cultural and community development activities.

There were in 2015 a little over 4000 students at UNILAB, with nearly half of these studying at a distance. The university has been highly successful in relation to widening participation. The proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is extremely high, with 90% of the initial cohorts from lower-income families[9], a very unusual figure for a federal university, especially before the compulsory introduction of quotas. Nevertheless, it faces some similar challenges to those of UNILA, in terms of developing a high-quality university in a remote area away from metropolitan centres, preventing the shift back towards conventional curricula and maintaining state support for this radical vision in the face of a changing political landscape.

Other examples of thematic federal universities include the Federal University of the Southern Frontier (UFFS[10]), a multi-campus institution focusing on the

[7] Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira.

[8] An additional campus has been established in São Francisco do Conde, Bahia.

[9] Family income of up to 3 minimum salaries.

[10] Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul. UFFS has a total of over 8000 students. It goes beyond the legal requirement (of 50%) and reserves 90% of its places for students from public schools.

agricultural worker population of southern Brazil, and the Federal University of Western Pará (UFOPA[11], originally intended as the University of Amazonian Integration) aiming for transnational cooperation between the countries of the Amazon rainforest.

Alternatives within the private sector

These alternative universities within the mainstream do not only appear within the public sector. There are also private institutions with distinct characters—as might be expected given the greater autonomy of the sector[12]. Founded in 2003, the Zumbi dos Palmares University in São Paulo, for example, is an institution focusing on the African Brazilian community. In the context of disproportionately low rates of enrolment to higher education for the black population, this institution allows an opportunity for accessing higher study, in the model of the historically black colleges and universities in the USA, with 90% of students being of African descent. Yet it has a further function acting as a focal point for the valuing and development of African Brazilian history, thought and culture.

Other alternative institutions within the mainstream include the "community universities" in the south of the country. These are private institutions set up by local communities to provide access to university for young people in the absence of state provision, and provide a boost for local industry, with a high degree of community involvement in governance. These institutions are by now well established and have their own national association[13], with 25 institutions across the country, including for example the University of Caxias do Sul, founded in 1967 with as many as 37,000 students (Schmidt, 2009).

Challenges faced

These institutions in the mainstream have a number of substantial benefits, including a steady funding stream (from public funds in the case of the federal institutions, or from student fees in the case of the private ones) and the convenience of using existing structures and procedures of curriculum and management. However, they face a constant struggle against the *centripetal forces* of the system, in order to maintain the distinctiveness of their vision and uphold their principles in all areas of their work.

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[11] Universidade Federal do Oeste do Pará.

[12] Religious higher education institutions, particularly Catholic ones, are common in Brazil. This study will not consider them as 'alternative', however, due to their formative role in creating the 'mainstream' institution and because in practice they customarily have only a few distinctive features in terms of curriculum and governance.

[13] ABRUC (Associação Brasileira de Universidades Comunitárias)

First, there is the question of the bureaucratic frameworks and pedagogical cultures pulling practice back towards the "norm." The framework of recognition of degrees, for example, and assumptions about modes of study and assessment present clear limitations on the ability of the taught courses to take on new formats that may be appropriate for their aims. One lecturer at UNILA, for example, expressed his frustration at the fact that their attempt to develop an alternative assessment scheme was ultimately thwarted by the constraints of the national framework. Selection of students is also determined to a large extent by federal policy. The challenges of the bureaucratic framework within which the federal universities operate can also be seen in the innovative Federal University of Southern Bahia, created in 2013, as emphasized by the first Rector of the institution, Naomar de Almeida Filho (Tavares & Romão, 2015).

Second, while funding provides security, it also creates forms of allegiance, accountability or dependence on the funder. In the case of the federal government, the existence of these institutions has been enabled by the propitious political climate during the administration of the Workers' Party,which has had close articulation with progressive academics,as well as availability of government funds. That scenario is precarious to say the least, and in 2015 there were already strong signs of the end of this favourable climate. In the private institutions there is greater autonomy, but nevertheless the customer power associated with full fee paying students presents a different form of constraint.

Exodus From the Mainstream

However, there are alternative institutions existing entirely outside of the mainstream education system. These are less prominent, less well documented, and as discussed above, might in some people's view have a dubious claim to being universities at all. Nevertheless, in using the label "university," they make an important statement about the nature of their institution, and the challenges being made to our conventional conceptualisations. In both of the cases outlined below, the aim is to provide a space for "convivial" learning (Illich, 1973), in which human beings share and develop, unmediated by rigid institutional forms.

The Intercultural Indigenous University of Maracanã Village (UIIAM[14]) was established in a spirit of defiance of the political and educational establishment. As stated by one of the organisers: "We don't want to do it within the state, ours is direct action. We don't want to compete for that power, because, besides not believing in it, we want to create alternatives for the people in the struggle." It grew out of the occupation in 2006 by various indigenous groups[15] of the former Museum

[14] Universidade Intercultural Indígena Aldeia Maracanã.

[15] In addition to the Amazon rainforest and other rural areas, there are a large number of indigenous people now located in the shantytowns or periphery areas of

of the Indian near the Maracanã football stadium in Rio de Janeiro. Some of the occupiers rejected the government's offer to create an indigenous cultural centre in exchange for vacating the building so it could be turned over to private developers. The building has become the focal point of a movement for political resistance, but also an educational centre, where people can come to do courses on indigenous culture. The initiative for the university grew organically out of these ad hoc educational activities. The aims of the initiative are:

> "Indianization"… which is "Humanization," that is, recognition, affirmation, identity, reinvention of reality through the perspective and principles of living of indigenous culture, which by its very nature is the negation of capitalist society, and the valuing of life and well-being. (Interview with activist of Maracanã Village)

This initiative responds not only to the lack of mainstream opportunities for indigenous people, but also the absence of indigenous knowledge and culture within the curriculum. Students come from the local area, but also from various other parts of the country, and even internationally. The reference to humanization above invokes the influence of Paulo Freire (e.g., 1972; 1994), whose ideas on dialogue, conscientisation and praxis in the context of adult education underpin the pedagogy of many of these initiatives.

A second example of this form of institution is the Pampédia Free[16] University in São Paulo. Like Maracanã Village, it started by offering regular workshops for the general public—although with a distinct underpinning political and epistemological view. It draws on the ideas of 17th century Czech educator Jan Comenius, and his concept of universal education (*Pampaedia*). It also has influences from Allan Kardec and Spiritism, a religious tradition that is highly popular in Brazil—based on the notion that humans are engaged in a process of constant improvement through incarnation through history in different bodies—although the university adheres strongly to principles of interreligious dialogue, and is not restricted to spiritists. The principles of Pampédia University revolve around democratisation of knowledge, interdisciplinarity, pluralism, spirituality, ethics and dialogue. Run by university lecturers, teachers, designers, artists, therapists and journalists, who coordinate the initiative in their spare time, it has a permanent building in the city of São Paulo in which seminars, discussions and workshops are held, as well as a range of online learning opportunities.

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large cities: the last census showed 15,000 indigenous people in the city of Rio de Janeiro (Interview with activist of Maracanã Village).

[16] The term "free" is used here in the sense of liberty, rather than in the sense of being without cost.

> Our idea… is to have knowledge organised in an interdisciplinary, organic way in the form of interdisciplinary groups and thematic axes that interlink. And the student on entering the Free University can make his or her own pathway through this content, and choose between face-to-face workshops, distance courses, tutoring…. (Interview with founder of the university)

Emerging from an alternative publishing house and an earlier educational initiative, known as the "Pampédia Free Space," it now has a more formalised offering, with fee payments for courses, although with no formal accreditation. In fact, freedom from the constraints of conventional assessment and Ministry of Education recognition is one of the key principles: in the words of the founder of the university, "what we are emphasising here is what the student produces, not the diploma." Consequently, the university works in accordance with the idea that people can become professionals through portfolios of work and not only through certificates. Current courses include "Spiritist Pedagogy," "Deconstructing Nietzsche," "Peace Education and Conflict Mediation" and "Education and Spirituality." There is even a proposal to set up a "free PhD" in the near future, involving the writing of a thesis (or some other form of intellectual, artistic or social product) but without formal accreditation.

Finally, there is the Popular University of Social Movements (UPMS)[17]. This initiative grew out of the World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre in 2003, and the support of the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (e.g., 2008), and his ideas of *intercultural translation* and *ecology of knowledge*. Its fundamental aim is to promote the exchange of learning between social movements, through what it describes as a process of "self-education," and the building of bridges between academic and popular knowledge. Unlike the above two initiatives, UPMS does not have a physical location: it is instead a network, running educational activities wherever its adherents decide to locate them. The university websites describes its participants as: "activists and leaders of social movements, members of NGOs, as well as social scientists, researchers and artists engaged in progressive social transformation." Workshops—recommended to be intensive collective experiences running over two days—have focused on themes such as displacement, self-determination and the relationship between social movements and the state, and have been held in cities as diverse as Mumbai, Madrid and Medellín.

These initiatives have either not been able to join the mainstream, have not attempted, or in some cases have been offered but have deliberately rejected the chance. The latter is the case of Maracanã Village, who see a splinter group's

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[17] Universidade Popular dos Movimentos Sociais.

acceptance of the government's proposal for a cultural centre as a "sell-out", and an unacceptable compromise of the political and cultural principles of the movement. The advantage of not being part of the mainstream is that the initiatives are relatively free of constraints to embody the vision that they hold to: they retain their authenticity, and are not compromised or pulled in contrary directions.

Nevertheless, there are some obvious challenges, first of which is resources. These initiatives function on a shoestring budget, and therefore rely on donated or occupied buildings, volunteered staff time of lecturers from other universities or of activists, and minimal teaching resources and equipment. This lack of physical and human resources imposes limits on the nature and range of courses taught, and consequently (or for reasons of the interests of the creators) they largely focus on humanities and social science related areas.

The second major challenge is the lack of a recognised diploma. As these institutions do not have legal recognition, there are restrictions on their ability to certify the learning that has taken place—beyond the value perceived by learners and teachers. The disadvantage for students is that—unless the ideas of portfolio work proposed by Pampédia take root—they cannot then convert that learning into other forms of opportunity in the mainstream society, such as employment and further study. This constraint has an obvious impact on demand for the courses, and explains the low uptake, particularly amongst school leavers.

The perspective of these radical initiatives would be that seeking mainstream assessment and certification is not necessary and would signify undermining their mission: they do not need endorsement from the state and indeed, such an endorsement would undermine their authenticity and autonomy. In order to challenge the deeply unjust foundations of modern society—even while standing within—it is seen to be necessary to create alternative forms of conducting and evaluating learning and human development, ones that do not rely on instrumental rewards within the competitive, capitalist system.

Liminal Experiences

Finally, there are some initiatives that aim to respond to the dangers and limitations of standing either within or outside the mainstream by having one foot in each. They aim to obtain some of the benefits of mainstream support, but while maintaining a significant degree of autonomy.

The Landless Movement

The Movement of Landless Rural Workers[18] (MST or Landless Movement) emerged in the early 1980s so as to challenge the inequitable distribution of land in the country and the predicament of millions of peasants who had been pushed off

[18] Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra.

the land into day labouring or into the urban shantytowns. In addition to an intense programme of land occupation and resettlement, the movement places a strong emphasis on education. It has extensive experience of running educational initiatives for adults, including basic literacy, but also has a large network of its own state funded schools (McCowan, 2009). Its educational ideas are strongly influenced by Freire, and aim to promote conscientisation of students, as well as a valuing of the rural context and strengthening of the identity of the social movement.

In more recent years it has also moved into the sphere of providing higher education. The model it uses is to provide its own courses, but in partnership with recognised public institutions—including prestigious state and federal universities such as the State University of São Paulo and the University of Brasília. Most commonly, it runs teacher education courses, according to its distinctive philosophy of "Pedagogy of the Land," but it also has a range of other degrees, including social work and law, in addition to non-accredited courses. The principal site for the delivery of these courses is the Florestan Fernandes National School, which was constructed in the state of São Paulo by volunteer workers from the movement, and opened in 2005. Over 24,000 people have studied at the institution. However, even within this autonomous institution, the validation for the degree courses is provided by recognised universities. This accreditation allows the landless people to gain public recognition, move on to further study, and even (though not encouraged by the movement) to forms of urban employment outside of agriculture.

The Rio Negro Institute of Indigenous Knowledge and Research[19]

The challenges of being within or outside the mainstream have been addressed in a rather different way by the indigenous peoples of a remote region of the Brazilian Amazon near the Colombian border. A partnership between the Federation of Indigenous Organisations of the Rio Negro[20] and the Brazilian NGO Socio-Environmental Institute (ISA)[21] led to the development of a project for an institute of higher learning in the region (FOIRN/ISA, 2013). This project grew out of the successes of development of indigenous schools in the region and the increasing number of young people completing the secondary level, accompanied by concerns about these young people being forced to move to the state capital Manaus, and being drawn permanently away from their communities, their culture and language.

> So what was thought of was a form of advanced study that would be in sync with the philosophy of the indigenous people….Often, when

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[19] Instituto dos Conhecimentos Indígenas e Pesquisa do Rio Negro
[20] Federação das Organizações Indígenas do Rio Negro.
[21] Instituto Socioambiental.

> their children go to study, sometimes they don't manage to finish, other times they finish but when they come back they end up dislocated—it seems they've lost their direction: they don't feel from the community any more, but neither do they feel part of the society outside. So this is a concern of many of the community leaders, the parents. (Interview with local NGO worker)

This institution is still in the process of being established—drawing on a series of collaborative meetings dating back to 2009—and will not be fully functioning until 2016. Nevertheless, it merits attention as it provides a distinct model of how to reconcile autonomy with mainstream support. The institution aims to break with the conventional disciplinary categories of mainstream institutions by orienting work in four axes: "Stewardship of the world" (broadly covering environmental and natural sciences), "Narratives of origin, routes of transformation" (broadly covering arts and humanities), "Indigenous economy" and "Development, and territorial and project management." These wide-ranging subject areas are delivered partly in Portuguese and partly in one of three indigenous languages: Baniwa, Tukano and Nheengatú. The lecturers of the institution are a combination of community elders with little in the way of formal qualifications and academics with conventional postgraduate degrees—thus beginning to challenge conventional notions of academic "expert," critiqued by Illich (1971). It is also based in multiple locations: partly in the small town that serves as a regional capital—São Gabriel da Cachoeira—and partly at a distance in the small communities dotted along the Rio Negro and tributaries. This blended mode aids in avoiding brain drain from the communities to the cities. The alternative curriculum also serves to equip young people to work in the communities, rather than exclusively in the urban space, but also enables them to interact effectively in the environment of mainstream society. Beyond its teaching function, it also aims to provide a distinctive contribution to knowledge:

> [T]his university starts with a fantastic approach of deconstruction that is "other knowledges," beyond Western, scientific knowledge—it already comes with this other richness. So in my opinion it's also a scientific experience of great quality. An inclusive science, of other points of view…. (Interview with local NGO worker)

In order to realise this vision, the Institute has adopted an institutional form termed "social organisation": with this status it can receive state funding, but is not a federal or state level higher education institution, and therefore does not need to comply with all forms of legislation and regulation around curriculum structure, accreditation and management. Initially, the courses will lead to the qualification of

tecnólogo, broadly equivalent to an *associate* or *foundation* degree rather than a full bachelors. However, even with this more autonomous form of institution there are seen to be challenges in running a complex organisation, being accountable to state officials, administering financial accounts and so forth in the context of a remote rainforest setting with logistical obstacles and poor internet connectivity.

Resources, Recognition and Embodiment

All of the initiatives outlined above aim to challenge the contemporary direction of travel of education systems: the unfair distribution of the fruits of education, the marginalisation of alternative forms of knowledge and meaningful learning, and the reduction of space for conviviality (Illich, 1973). Yet they do so in very different ways. One way in which the institutions analysed above could be classified is by their aims, mission or values—whether to preserve and develop a culturally specific form of knowledge, to foster social transformation or to provide spiritually liberating learning. The initiatives outlined in this article could be grouped in the following way:

Mission	Institution
Regional/international cooperation	UNILA UNILAB UFOPA
Racial/ethnic identity and empowerment	Rio Negro Institute Maracanã Village Zumbi dos Palmares
Social and political transformation	Landless Movement Popular University of Social Movements
Spiritual development	Pampédia
Local community development	Community universities UFFS

However, as seen above they also differ in terms of the institutional forms their innovations have taken, and their approximation towards or distancing from the mainstream, and it is this that has been the primary focus of analysis in this article. The initiatives that reject mainstream forms to a large extent adhere to the ideas expressed by Illich (1971, p. 67) that

> School prepares for the alienating institutionalization of life by teaching the need to be taught. Once this lesson is learned, people lose their incentive to grow in independence; they no longer find

> relatedness attractive, and close themselves off to the surprises which life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional definition.

The ultimate aim of these initiatives is to embody their fundamental purpose. For example, in the case of the Maracanã Village, to represent the space of respectful, non-authoritarian relations, inclusive and valuing of diverse cultures and enabling emancipatory learning. In the case of the community universities, to provide an institution attentive to and governed by the local community, enabling access for young people and boosting employment and local economic growth. In the case of UNILA, to foster cultural and political integration across Latin America.

In order to achieve these aims, two principal elements need to be present: *resources* and *recognition*—relating respectively to what might be described as "input" and "output" factors. The primary resource is the teacher, in whatever form that figure may appear: if full-time staff are needed then there are significant costs in providing for their upkeep. Those institutions that rely on voluntary work of staff whose primary source of income is derived elsewhere suffer from the competing demands for their time. In addition, there are physical resources, including buildings, equipment and teaching materials. Depending on the model of higher education, these can be minimal, and those institutions relying primarily on oral interaction of small groups can survive with simple multipurpose accommodation. However, there are obvious limitations of the forms of study possible in this kind of environment.

Having said this, in some cases these radical initiatives outside the mainstream challenge the very idea that physical infrastructure and full-time paid staff are actually necessary for a university. The notion of university that they hold to is something altogether more fluid, it is a movement, a relationship between people, a spirit of learning, rather than a campus, a building and a degree. Nevertheless, even in this more fluid conception, some human and physical resources—not least of which people's *time*—are still required for them to function.

In addition to resources, these initiatives also need recognition, in the sense of public acknowledgement of the value of the learning taking place. In the first place, this is to ensure demand from prospective students and the motivation on the part of the learners to commit seriously to their studies . Demand, however, is also largely dependent on another form of recognition: the formal approval of the course of study in the external society, primarily in the labour market. This form of recognition expresses itself most obviously in the form of the degree diploma, along with—in many cases—the approval of a relevant professional body. Given the centrality of formal qualifications to most opportunities relating to formal employment and further study, the absence of this kind of recognition of learning can place "graduates" at a significant disadvantage in their subsequent lives. This level of risk would make this form of higher learning most readily available to the

most privileged (who can afford to let go of the security of a salaried job) or to the most desperate (who would have had no other chance of higher education in any event). Many of these initiatives rightly focus on the intrinsic value of higher learning: yet if they do not attend additionally to the instrumental needs of their students (and sadly, perhaps even desires for positional advantage) then it is rare that they can attract much interest from their target population.

The counterargument is that if an institution always compromises its beliefs in order to "fit in" with the rest of society, then no real change will ever take place. Initiatives such as Maracanã Village forcefully critique other indigenous groups who have accepted government funding and in the process compromised their political and cultural vision. In this way, "institutionalisation" poses a constant threat to these radical initiatives, while at the same time, avoiding institutionalisation can leave them isolated and impotent.

"Embodiment"—the actual manifestation of the goals and principles the initiative is promoting, whether dialogue, co-operativism, enquiry or equality—is subject then to the threat of progressive encroachment of resources and recognition. Resources are of course essential, and in most cases, acquiring more resources will enable an initiative to either enhance the quality of its work or expand availability and accessibility. However, over-attention to the question of resources can lead to dangers: it is rare for investment to be made without conditions, and initiatives will end up adapting the vision of their work, along the line of the saying "he who pays the piper calls the tune." Alternatively, if resources are gathered through charging fees to students there are obvious implications for equity.

Recognition also poses risks. As with resources, desire to obtain recognition of learning from national higher education boards or professional associations can lead to an undesirable adaptation of values or course content. The existence of the instrumental product of the course—the diploma—can also serve to undermine the intrinsic value of the venture for students and lecturers. Furthermore, as with all educational undertakings, the existence of a final summative assessment—particularly if it is a badly designed one—can have a negative impact on learning, with unintended backwash effects. The Landless Movement has appeared to have resolved this tension by partnering with established universities to provide formal accreditation, although not all are in agreement with this kind of solution: the organisers of Pampédia Free University originally had such a partnership, but extricated themselves from it on account of the financial cost and constraints on their pedagogical practice.

In their study of three alternative universities in Europe, Huisman et al. (2002, p. 329) conclude that:

> At present the "alternative" universities of the 60s—being in their adolescence or even adulthood—are still distinct from the more

> traditional universities in their respective countries. They were able to preserve a number of their unique characteristics, and have adjusted some of the others. The three universities are organisations that have been able to implement a large number of minor adjustments…into their original idea to make it possible to live in the changing environments, and thereby keeping their original idea alive.

These cases in the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway show an apparently successful trajectory of adaptation in order to maintain distinctiveness, even in the context of significant pressures of isomorphism. It must be borne in mind, however, that the "alternative" nature of these institutions is rather milder than the Brazilian cases assessed above, in that they are distinguished by two features: regional relevance (serving marginalised areas of the country) and innovative teaching and learning (particularly, problem based learning). As such, they correspond most closely to the thematic federal universities in Brazil, rather than the more radical cases that challenge fundamental characteristics of admissions, curriculum and institutional structure. It is not clear whether a similar process of strategic adaptation would function in the latter cases.

The threats posed by emphasis on capturing resources and ensuring recognition are not confined to alternative institutions by any means. While not perhaps providing a compelling argument for abandoning institutions altogether, these considerations do vindicate Illich's concerns about the encroaching dangers of the process of institutionalisation, and the need to be constantly vigilant that the aim of meaningful learning for all is not being undermined by the structures created to promote it.

What we are faced with, therefore, is the image of a flower bud held in a large hand: the hand can support and protect the bud, but if the fingers squeeze too hard, the bud will be crushed. The features of mainstream higher education institutions—their bureaucratic structures, their channels of financial, physical and human resources, accreditation and prestige—can act to ensure the viability and sustainability of higher learning; yet if care is not taken, these very same features can undermine or even destroy the learning they are supposed to promote. Alternative higher education seeks to recuperate what is perceived to be the forgotten essence of higher learning, or to provide a space for new or previously marginalised epistemological perspectives. It remains to be seen whether these courageous visions can survive outside the protective cover of the mainstream, or alternatively retain their authenticity within it.

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Author Details

Tristan McCowan is Reader in Education and International Development at the Institute of Education, University College London. E-mail: t.mccowan@ucl.ac.uk

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