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Student assistance in higher education in Brazil

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Abstract

This article aims at analyzing student assistance policy in Brazilian public universities. According to the National Plan of Student Assistance, conditions of staying at university must be offered to needy students. It is about the social rights issue of the higher education policy, considering the access and conditions for students to remain at the university. The National Program of Student Assistance - PNAES aims at extending the conditions of permanence of national public institutions students, allocating financial resources destined to provide a series of actions of assistance to students such as: scholarships, housing, food, transport, physical and mental health, and accessibility for disabled students.

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1. Introduction

The reform of higher education in courses in Brazil is a greater process of redevelopment of State Capital under neoliberal aegis.

Neoliberalism occurs in different ways and countries all around the world. While Thatcher and Regan were implanting the neoliberal politic in England and in the USA in the 80’s, in Brazil, there was a democratic movement in answer to a long dictatorship from 1964 to 1985 which culminated with the progressive Federal Constitution of 1988.

With the election of Fernando Collor de Melo and subsequently, Fernando Henrique Cardoso- FHC (1995-2002), the country joins the liberal reforms which were developed by the Lula Government (2003-2010) and the Dilma Government (2012-2014) with a few peculiar characteristics.

In the case of educational politics, the changes in the legislation still happen in the period of regulation of the social right to education guaranteed in the Federal Constitution. The first complementary law proposal was routed to the Chambers in 1988. After many discussions and participation in many social movements, the first proposal, which was more democratic, was approved, the Law of Guidelines and Basis of National Education- LDBEN, including the varied education levels: Basic Education (which includes preschool, primary school, and high school) and Higher Education.

During the Lula Government (2003-2010), as a result of the Executive Reform of the Higher Education Group (GERES) work, a law project was proposed to regulate the university reform, from a set of regulations, interim measures, and promulgated decrees during the Lula Government, setting continuum for the defense of reforms started by the previous government.

In the set of regulations that composes the Brazilian higher education, the Plan for Educational Development (PDE) proposition stands out among the others. It was approved by the Lula Government on April 24, 2007 with the intent of aligning education with the Economic Acceleration Project (PAC). The PDE received much criticism for not being built in a democratic way, going in the opposite direction of historic movements like the political processes of definition by the Law of Guidelines and Basis for National Education (Law n. 10.172/01) in which there was intense social participation.

The PDE presents proposals with basic and higher education. Regarding higher education, the PDE understood as its guidelines:

i) the expansion of job openings, considered unacceptable that just 11% of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 have access to this educational level; ii) quality guarantee, it is not necessary just to increase, it is necessary to increase with quality; iii) promote social inclusion by education, reducing our history of waste of talents, considering that it is proven that we have creative and talented young people who have been systematically excluded by a filter of economic nature; IV) territorial ordination, allowing that quality education be accessible in more remote regions of the country; v) social and economic development, making higher education the key element.

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3 The presidential decrees that gave origin to the PDE were: 6.093/07 (deals with the organization of the Alphabetized Brazil Program); 6.094/07 (deals with the implementation of Committed Goals All for Education); 6.095/07 (established guidelines for the constitution of Federal Institutions of Education, Science, and Technology- Ifet); and 6.096/07 (institutes the Program for the Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities Reuni).

4 According to Ghiraldelli (2009, p. 251): “The basic idea of PAC was to become a program capable of preparing the country’s infrastructure for growth that should come from the tributary and political reform, pulled by Strong governmental support in social projects. The Plan of Education Development (PED) was considered, then, the PAC of Education.
whether formatter of highly qualified human resources or whether indispensable part in the scientific-technologic production, in the integration and formation of the Nation. (BRAZIL, 2007, p. 26).

In order to attend to the above objectives foreseen by the PED, the following programs were proposed: Program for the Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities (REUNI); National Program for Student Assistance (PNAES); Financing Fund for Higher Education Students (FIES), University for Everyone Program (PROUNI), and the National Evaluation of Higher Education System (SINAES), which are the main programs structured by the proposal of expansion and democratization that marked the Lula Government.

This article will concentrate on the analysis of the National Program for Student Assistance (PENAES).

### 1.1. The political access to permanency to Higher Education in Brazil

Historically, Higher Education in Brazil was marked by access of an elite group. Brazil was a colony of Portugal between 1500 and 1822. During this period the access to Higher Education was possible only for the children of elite colonial who could cover the costs of studies at the royal court, Lisboa. Between 1772 and 1808, six hundred and eight Brazilians studied at Coimbra University, most of whom ended up choosing scientific careers like philosophy or mathematics.

With the independence of Brazil from Portugal, the first Brazilian Constitution, granted by Pedro I in 1824, had an item destined to education, inspiring the idea of a national education system. According to the Constitution, the Empire must have primary schools, gymnasiums, and universities. However, these precepts were never fulfilled.

This was just an organization of capitalism during the era of monopoly from the 1930’s an acceleration of the industrialization process associated to the organization of the State as the centralizer, which emphasized the organization process of higher education in the country and offered real possibilities for the emergence of Universities.

Concerning the expansion process of higher education, it began in the 1970’s, due to the increasing demand of this teaching level, a phenomena associated to the demand for human resources enabled to attend to the demands coming from the economic modernization lived by the country.

From the 1990’s the expansion intensifies, being mostly offered by private Higher Education Institutes. Thus, the process named “democratization” of educational opportunities in higher education was confused with the mere and trampled massification of enrollments, being distorted by the supply of paid Higher Education.

The policy of expansion of Higher Education was an action that gave visibility and legitimacy to the Lula Government, which one of his objectives was to attend to the challenge placed by the PNE (2001-2010): a) Provide, until the end of the decade, the offer for higher education to, 30% of the age group of 18 to 24 years old, and b) Establish a policy of Expansion that decreases the inequalities of the current offers among the different regions in the country. (BRAZIL, 2001, p. 43).

In a way, the Lula Government continued the expansion process initiated by the FHC Government, allowing that the private realm could continue expanding. However, it advances to provide the expansion and internalization of the federal network of higher education.

The Program of Expansion of Public Higher Education/ EXPANDIR (2003-2006), the Program for Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities (REUNI), and the Integration of Professional and Technological Federal Institutions, were the main programs that marked the federal higher education.

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5 Sguissard (2004) identified two steps in the expansion of higher education: from 1964 to 1994 and from 1994 to 2006. At the beginning of the first step (military regime) there was a predominance of enrollments in public education, which was inverted in the beginning of the 70’s. At the end of the 70’s, there was 41.6% of enrollments in public education and 58.4% in the private sector. In the corresponding period of redemocratization (1994-2006) the system showed merely vegetive growth. In 1980, there was 882 IES in the country and in 1995 only 12 institutions were aggregated to the system, counting the growth of 1.36% during that time. During the FHC Government, there was a significant rise in the openings in the private sector. According to data from the 2007 Higher Education Census, between 1996 and 2007, 1287 new IES were created which increased the number of enrollments to 5,880,381 students in 2007. However, this growth was due mostly to private IES, which had 74.6% of the enrollments. With the legal preview at the LDBEN in 1996 the University Centers as an academic organization, realized that greatest number of enrollments were in the smaller institutions (89% of Private Institutions).

6 In 2003 there were 1,859 higher education institutions in the country and in 2012 the number reached 2,416.
Table 1. Expansion of the Federal Network of Higher Education 2003-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Cities Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>59 (14 new)</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>63 (4 new)</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(126 new)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(47 new)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sesu/MEC

From 2008, the actions of the EXPANDIR Program occurred concomitantly with the action of the Program of Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities Program (REUNI), approved by the Decree nº6.096/2007. REUNI presented as a justification the goal for supply expansion of higher education. Its objective was to "create conditions for the extension of access and permanency in higher education at undergraduate level, for the better use of the physical infrastructure and existing human resources in the federal universities". REUNI’s goal is to elevate the rate of average conclusion of the undergraduate courses to ninety percent and the relation of (classroom) undergraduate students per professor to eighteen until the end of the five years from the beginning of each plan.

In a way, REUNI, characterized as a management contract, which lays down rigid targets for counterpart receiving. The logic of financing through contracts was a FHC project, in which the debates about the management contracts were directly related to the transformation of the IFES in public foundations of private rights or social organizations. (AMARAL, 2003, p.118). For this author, the proposals were “a true university anti-autonomy, to obligate the institutions, upon management contract, to reach goals determined in a negotiation in which there is clearly a more fragile side in the confrontation with the government: the institutions themselves” (AMARAL, 2013 p.132 apud CISLACHI e SILVA).

According to Ferreira (2012, p.465) a few aspects of REUNI, in relation to the increase in night job openings, the reduction of evasion, occupation of idle vacancies, the academic restructuring, were measures already adopted by the Fernando Henrique Cardoso Government and recommended by the World Bank (1995) which pass through the standpoint of rationalization of management and optimization of costs, and were maintained during the Lula Government.

The expansion promotes the rise in internalization of the number of vacancies, but not alone does it guarantee the access to historically excluded groups, being necessary the supply of other complementary actions. In this respect, it was also proposed the National High School Exam (ENEM), the Unified Selection System (SISU), and the most

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7 The National High School Exam (ENEM) was created in 1998. At the time the goal was to evaluate high school graduates, integrated the Evaluation of Basic Education System (SAEB). ENEM and SISU altered the selection mechanisms, unifying the process. In a way, these changes have made possible greater mobility to students and the possibility in competing for vacancies in any university in the country. However, it continues based on meritocratic aspects.
recent vacancy reserve for students deriving from private high schools, black, or indigenous (Decree n° 7,824, October 11, 2012).

Over time, ENEM has suffered changes in its applications, also becoming a way to access higher education. At first a few institutions, mostly private ones, started using it as a way to access their selection process. However, with the institution of PROUNI, the exam became notorious as a way to access since participation in ENEM started being mandatory criteria. From 2009, ENEM started being used as a way to get into Federal Public Institutions, which gradually will become the only entry procedure. Along with ENEM, SISU emerged, as a computerized system to select candidates according to their grade on ENEM.

Other than guaranteeing access, it was necessary to think of strategies that could guarantee the permanence and conclusion of students inserted into higher education. The permanence policy of Higher Education adopted by the Lula Government and followed by the Dilma Government isn’t characterized as a single policy. It is carried out by programs that attend public and private institutions with different strategies inclining towards a focused and privatist model, characteristic of the neoliberal State model in force.

1.2 The National Student Assistance Program

To make the permanence of poor students inserted in federal institutions of higher education possible, The National Student Assistance Program was proposed, initially outlined through the Regulatory Ordinance MEC n°39 from December 12, 2007, and later on, transformed into The National Student Assistance Program by the Decree n°7,234 from July 19, 2010.

Even though the action offered from PNAES are the same offered historically by the Higher Education Institutions (university restaurant, living, attention to health actions, and even scholarships) gain a new impulse with the intensification of financing promoted by PNAES.

PNAES composes a group of actions that seek “democratization” of access and permanence of poor students in higher education and it should consider the necessity to encourage equality of opportunities, contribute for an improvement of academic performance and act, preventively, in the situations of retention and drop outs arising from insufficient financial conditions.

The program has as objectives: I- democratize the permanence conditions as IFES; II- minimize the effect of social and regional inequality in the permanence and conclusion of Higher Education; III- reduce the retention and drop out fees; and, IV- contribute to the promoting of social inclusion by education.

According to the decree, the student assistance actions should be developed by the Universities and Federal Institutes, in a way that is articulated with the teaching activities, research, and extension, only to the students enrolled in classroom undergraduate courses, in the following areas: student living, food, transportation, health attention, digital inclusion, culture, sports, daycare, pedagogic support, and access, participation, of students with learning disabilities, global disorders of development, high skills, and giftedness.

The decree is clear in defining as competencies of the Universities and Federal Institutions the creation of criteria and selection mechanisms; “requirements for social assistance perception”; and, “PNAES evaluation mechanisms”; according to the particularities. However, it indicates that the services and benefits be offered “mainly to students coming from public schools of basic education or with a family income per capita of up till one and half of the minimum wage, without loss of the other requirements held by the federal institutions of higher education” and “undergraduate students”, preferably on their first degree.

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8 To attend to the students inserted in the network of private higher education the following programs were proposed: University for Everyone Program (PROUNI): created by the Provisional Measure n°213/2004 and posteriorly converted to Law n° 11,096, January 13, 2005, and FIES, and the implementation of the Student Financing Fund (FIES) which suffered alterations and with the new rules made possible solidarity bail, in such a way that the students are each other’s guarantors in small groups, increased the dead line for paying off debts which rose to being twice the duration of the course, with the dead line of 6 months for beginning to pay the loan. From 2005, financing for partial scholarships was granted, benefitted from a 50%PROUNI scholarship. Currently, financing is also granted for students who find themselves in the situation of complementary scholarship holders, that is, PROUNI students who have a benefit of 25% on tuition. Caixa Econômica Federal is the financing entity for FIES.
Cislaghi e Silva (2012, p.499) call attention to PNAES’s last goal, which reinforced the student assistance as a “strategy to spread the idea of the possibility of social growth and reach social cohesion by the promises of education”. It also shows that there were significant changes between the Plan and Program approved by the decree. It was identified that in the second criteria included, it was focused and extremely degraded for student assistance, lowering the autonomy of universities in relation to the definition of criteria consistent to their reality.

Menezes (2012, p.74) points out that the student assistance in the IFES didn’t have as a mark just PNAES, but “the program contributed strongly to reconfigure their actions and insert them in the organizational structure of federal universities.”.

In relation to the financing destined to student assistance during this decade, it was not evident in the legislation in force, documents that covered and designated resources to cover the costs of student assistance programs. To the contrary, there was a movement for denying the leaders in providing resources for student assistance. This is evident by the promulgation of LDB in 1996, which is registered in article 71, subsection IV, the State’s lack of responsibility with the student assistance financing.

However, the decree that created PNAES started to foresee the financial funding for the financing of student assistance actions, by means of financial funding directly with IFES. The costs of the program occur due to budget appropriation annually consigned by the Ministry of Education or the federal institutions of higher education “being of the obligation of the Executive Power to combine the quantity of beneficiaries to the existing budget appropriations”.

The distribution of PNAES resources among the IFES is achieved on the basis of the “PNAES Headquarters”. These headquarters were defined in the 46th Fonaprace Meeting held in October 2009 in Belo Horizonte/MG. The objective was to define the budget headquarters that could guarantee the continuity of specific resources towards student assistance, “since the current model promoted distortions in the student profile, to establish different weights in various courses, especially in those with greater social prestige” (FONAPRACE, 2012, p.33) The headquarters use as a basis for calculating the data in reference to the indicator “students equivalent of education”9 of the Data Integration Platform of IFES (PINGIFES) 2011.

Graph 01 – Evolution of PNAES Resources from 2008 until 2013.


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9 “Indicator that seeks to portray the total number of students enrolled in an IFES from the calculation that seeks to match students with courses that are differentiated: cost level, standard duration time and efficiency in graduating its participants, using itself as a mathematic model which includes a range of constants and variable, therefore aiming to portray the number of comparable students among all the courses and IFES taken into consideration”. (MEC, 2014).
Silveira (2012) showed in his research the actions foreseen by the main lines of PNAES are in organization by the 63 Federal Institutions of Higher Education, mirrored by the 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District. In general, he identified that the main actions undertaken are: student living, daycare, and food, whether by means of the own university facilities (student houses or university restaurant) or by financial aid, called Permanence Scholarship by most institutions; transportation, offered by student cards or financial help, health actions, sports, and culture.

Graph 2- Benefits attended by PNAES 2008-2011

Graph II shows the exponential growth of quantitative benefits given in the order of approximately 544%. It should be emphasized that the students may be benefitted from more than one kind of assistance.

It is observed, from the implanting of PNAES the scholarship option as a strategy to attending most of PNAES’s 11 acting lines. This option characterizes PNAES as a focused program, which hinders the universalization of student assistance by means of increasing the infrastructure, the fight for the free ass, and consequently, for the universalization of these actions and extension of rights. Furthermore, the option of scholarship supply, food, and living for example, in detriment of building restaurants and student living, reinforces the idea of market and individualism: in other words, with the scholarship, the student consumes in an isolated manner.

Individualism is also reinforced to the extent that the student user the student assistance actions starts being charged as the only one responsible for his academic yield as a condition to maintain the benefits. This action takes the responsibility away from the University of rethinking elements such as teacher training, curriculum, methodologies, structure, among others.

Conclusion

This article analyzes the Nation Student Assistance Program, developed from the expansion policy of Higher Education adopted by Brazil, with the goal of attending to the challenge placed by the National Education Plan-PNE of enrolling in the higher education 30% of the population of the age group between 18 and 24 until 2011, and that 40% were in public higher education institutions.

Reinforcing the democratization speech of higher education, public, free, and of quality, policies and programs were implanted and implemented to make access possible to higher education, especially to young people and workers.

The study showed that the National Student Assistance Program configured itself as a governmental strategy, by means of allocating the financial resources passed directly to the Universities and Federal Institutes; aims to offer actions that make permanence and course conclusion possible for poor students. This way, it ensures that socially
excluded groups from university have their right to education integrally answered because the increase in vacancies and the creation of access strategies by themselves do not guarantee that economically vulnerable students conclude their studies.

Democratization of Higher Education means that the process that makes this education level accessible to all social classes, especially the groups which were historically excluded from this access, reaches a system of universal action. The Higher Education in Brazil was historically marked by its elite access. From the 1970’s an expansion process has begun, arising from the increased demand for this teaching level, a phenomena associated to the demands of human resources enabled to attend to the demands coming from economic modernization . Since 1990, this expansion intensified, being primarily offered by private Higher Education Institutions. Therefore, the process named “democratization of educational opportunities in higher education” is confused with the massification of enrollments.

The expansion of vacancies is a historic revindication of social movements, and therefore, all the programs that have this goal, are able to receive much adhesion from Brazilian society. Nonetheless, the expansion proposed is based on standards required by capitalism, materialized in the proposals agreed upon from the World Bank.

Analyzed from the standpoint of social rights, on one side the government attends old revindications of society for greater access to higher education, free teaching, and quality and student assistance for those who depend on concrete actions to continue studying. On the hand, the government also attends to the financial and investor capital in higher education.

The article shows that, other than guaranteeing access, it was necessary to think of strategies that could guarantee permanence and conclusion of students inserted in higher education. Hence, student assistance gained a new status from 2008, with the National Student Assistance Plan, and posteriorly with the transformation of the National Student Assistance Plan, by Decree n°7,234/2010. Even though the actions offered from PNAES are practically the same historically offered by Higher Education Institutes (university restaurant, living, actions of health attention, and even scholarships) , they gain a new impulse from the intensification of financing and restructuring of teams acquiring characteristics inherent to social policies in neoliberal times.

References


