

**THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF ACCESS TO BRAZILIAN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
REALITY AND CHALLENGES**

***A DEMOCRATIZAÇÃO DO ACESSO À EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR BRASILEIRA:  
REALIDADE E DESAFIOS***

***LA DEMOCRATIZACIÓN DEL ACCESO A LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR  
BRASILEÑA: REALIDAD Y DESAFIOS***

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**ABSTRACT:** Considering education as a human right, this article aimed to discuss and analyze Higher Education in Brazil, which besides preserving knowledge, has the role of intellectually forming and renewing the human experience. From this perspective it is possible to observe that the democratization of the access before the present capitalist society becomes worrisome. For the purposes of this study, a bibliographical research, resulting in a significant increase in the number of enrollments at that level of education in recent years, both in public and private institutions, which may be justified by programs that facilitate such access. In this context it is hoped to stimulate other pedagogical initiatives, with some proposals that can be practiced aiming a qualitatively contribution to the expansion and improvement of the quality of the system, since it is necessary to exercise caution in analyzing the increase only by the quantitative bias.

**KEYWORDS:** Higher education. Democratization. Access.

**RESUMO:** Considerando a educação como um direito humano, o presente artigo tem como objetivo discutir e analisar a Educação Superior no Brasil, que além de conservar o saber, tem o papel de formar e renovar intelectualmente a experiência humana. Dentro desta perspectiva, é possível observar que se torna preocupante a democratização do acesso diante da atual sociedade capitalista. Para fins desse estudo, realizou-se uma pesquisa bibliográfica, que apresentou como resultado um aumento significativo no número de matrículas neste nível de ensino nos últimos anos, tanto em instituições públicas quanto privadas, o que pode ser justificado pelos programas que facilitam esse acesso. Nesse contexto, espera-se estimular outras iniciativas pedagógicas, com algumas propostas que podem ser praticadas almejando

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*a contribuição de maneira qualitativa para a expansão e a melhoria da qualidade do sistema, pois é necessário ter cautela em analisar a expansão apenas pelo viés quantitativo.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação superior. Democratização. Acesso.

**RESUMEN:** *Considerando la educación como un derecho humano, el presente artículo tiene como objetivo discutir y analizar la Educación Superior en Brasil, que además de conservar el saber, tiene el papel de formar y renovar intelectualmente la experiencia humana. Dentro de esta perspectiva, es posible observar que se ve como preocupante la democratización del acceso delante de la sociedad capitalista actual. Para los fines de ese estudio, se realizó una investigación bibliográfica, que tuvo como resultado un aumento significativo en el número de matrículas en este nivel de enseñanza en los últimos años, tanto en instituciones públicas como privadas, lo que se justifica por los programas que facilitan ese acceso. En ese contexto, se espera estimular otras iniciativas pedagógicas, con algunas propuestas que pueden ser practicadas anhelando la contribución de manera cualitativa para la expansión y la mejora de la calidad del sistema, pues es necesario tener precaución para analizar la expansión apenas por el punto de vista cuantitativo.*

**PALABRAS-CLAVE:** Educación superior. Democratización. Acceso.

## Introduction

Education is a human right that must not be neglected. In this way, Higher Education institutions have a social responsibility to continue the study of students who want to enter higher education level, since all social groups have the right to knowledge. When analyzing Higher Education in Brazil we realize that it has been structured in line with Public Education Policies, so the State has been transforming the organization of universities.

For Chauí (2003), the university is an institution inseparable from the heterogeneous social context in which it is inserted. The university is a place where different positions, actions, questions, shares, among other aspects and attributions occur that show the diversity that exists in this institution that is founded on practice, social action and public recognition.

Art. 43 of the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (LDBEN 9,394 / BRASIL, 1996) presents a series of purposes of Higher Education. Among them: to stimulate and develop the scientific spirit and reflective thinking; train citizens in different areas; encourage research; promote the dissemination of knowledge; provide services to the community and establish a relationship with it, promoting open extension to the population.

The Brazilian Constitution of 1988, in its art. 207, as well as articles 52, 53 and 54 of LDBEN point out that the university has teaching, research and extension as an inseparable principle (BRASIL, 1988; 1996). The university space is a field of production and application

of scientific knowledge, so in the university, it is possible to establish relations that develop the formation and qualification of the individual, with an interface between creation, transfer and application of knowledge.

For Sobrinho (2015, p. 585), the university is an environment of plural coexistence in society, in which it is possible to observe different responsibilities relevant to the diverse demands of the sectors of the population, starting with the “explanation of differences, through reasoned criticism in knowledge, values and the permanent practice of dialogue”<sup>4</sup>. The university's mission is to form and contribute to solving the population's problems, according to their possibilities and capabilities.

The plurality defended by the author above was not always present in university environments. Thus, in order to understand a little about Higher Education in Brazil, it is important to make a brief historical retrospective on the subject, to see how the trajectory of this teaching modality took place, as well as to verify its structure, composition and functioning according to public policies; and finally, to interpret the purposes and competences that expansion policies bring to Higher Education and reflect in today's society.

Higher education in Brazil started only in the 19th century, while on the island of Hispaniola, now the Dominican Republic, for example, it was instituted in the 16th century. In Brazil, “the first institutions of higher education were created only in 1808 and the first universities are even more recent, dating from the 1930s”<sup>5</sup> (DURHAM, 2005, p. 201).

In the colonial period, it was not interesting for the Portuguese Court to invest in educational institutions in Brazilian lands, because the objective was economic exploitation. Only after the Portuguese Court left Brazil did the history of Higher Education begin.

The first university institutions were created in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Olinda. The courses focused on liberal careers and the interest was to form professionals to meet the needs of the government and the local elite. The first university, which started operating in 1930, was the University of São Paulo (USP). With the Proclamation of the Republic, there was a decentralization of Higher Education and the emergence of new institutions, both public and private (DURHAM, 2005).

Higher education has meant, throughout history, a space for the formation of elites in which access was for the best with individual merits. Thus, the presence of selection and

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<sup>4</sup> “explicitação das diferenças, por meio da crítica fundamentada em conhecimentos, valores e a prática permanente do diálogo”

<sup>5</sup> “as primeiras instituições de ensino superior foram criadas apenas em 1808 e as primeiras universidades são ainda mais recentes, datando da década de 1930”

exclusion mechanisms is noticed. This panorama began to change during the period of populist governments (1946–1964) when education started to have an “ideological” sense. The State starts to promote actions that expand access, such as, for example, free education.

Trindade (2000) makes a historical retrospective of the models of the university since it appeared. Thus, from the 12th century until the Renaissance, it corresponds to the invention of the university that was initially established in Bologna, Italy, in the year 1088. Then it expanded to other parts of European territory, always under the protection of the Catholic Church. In the 15th century, the university was influenced by capitalism, humanism, as well as reform and counter-reform. Later, with the new scientific discoveries, combined with the new thought of valuing reason, religious tolerance and the English industrial revolution, there was a transition that extended until the 19th century when university institutions began to make science official. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the modern university is established, which still exists today.

In Brazil, it is interesting to highlight the University Reform, which took place in 1968, during the period of the military regime (1964-1985) and reached institutions of Higher Education through Law no. 5,540/68. This reform presented significant changes and produced paradoxical effects, since it extinguished the chair; introduced the departmental regime; created the system of credits by subjects; instituted semiannual periodicity and professors the regime of exclusive full-time dedication, as well as admission and progression regarding academic degrees.

It was during the military dictatorship that private higher education in Brazil gained strength, with the incentive to privatize education and the opening of courses, although the good concept is questionable, which compromised and even today compromises the quality of teaching (SILVA, 2007).

Given the above, it is clear that the changes that occur in the world influence the main pillars of a society, including education. For Sobrinho (2015), Higher Education is transformed simultaneously with the changes that take place in the economy, in politics and in cultural structures.

### **The expansion of Higher Education**

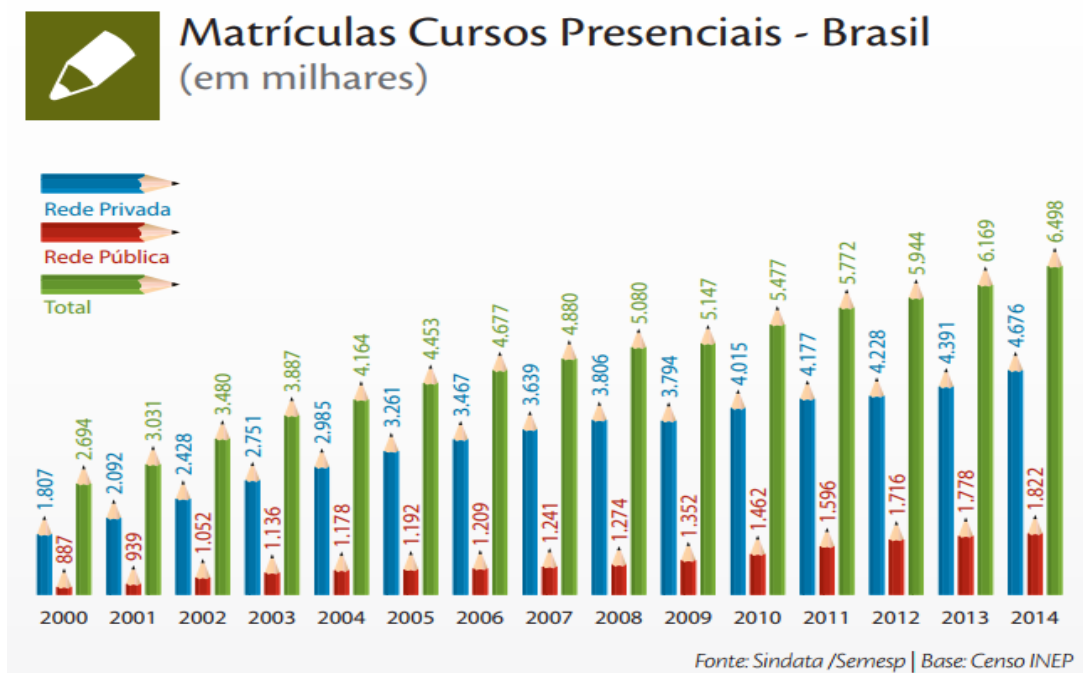
The expansion process of Higher Education took place through strategies and mechanisms linked to the world economy that pre-establishes knowledge as being a differential of the human being in the current and competitive capitalist world. These strategies and mechanisms are described in the studies below. According to Mancebo *et al.* (2015), the

expansion of higher education in Brazil can be approached by four axes, namely: the increase of higher education institutions for profit; some actions by the federal government expanding vacancies, enrollments and courses at federal institutions; the differentiation of courses, institutions and undergraduate teaching modalities such as, for example, distance education (DE) and; the expansion of postgraduate studies.

We have noticed a significant increase in student enrollment in Higher Education in recent years. The National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (Inep) points out that in 2014, 7,828,013 students enrolled in higher education courses in the country, which represented an increase of 85.35%, compared to 2004. The Census 2015 shows that there was a small drop in the number of new entrants to the public network. From 2014 to 2015 the number of students fell 2.6% (BRASIL, 2015).

For the Union of Maintaining Entities for Higher Education (SEMESP), 2016 also demonstrates this increase in enrollment in public and private institutions in the country, taking classroom courses as a reference, with an increase of 141% from 2000 to 2014. It is possible to see in the figure from the graph below the expressive number of enrollments in private institutions, in 2014 around 1.8 million students enrolled in public institutions compared to almost 4.7 million students enrolled in private institutions.

**Figure 1** - graph with enrollment of classroom courses in Brazil<sup>6</sup>



Source: Union of Maintaining Entities for Higher Education (SEMESP)–CENSO INEP.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> We read on the image: Title – Enrollments in classroom courses – Brazil (thousands) / Subtitles: Blue – Private Network; Red – Public network; Green – Total.

<sup>7</sup> Available: [http://convergenciacom.net/pdf/mapa\\_ensino\\_superior\\_2016.pdf](http://convergenciacom.net/pdf/mapa_ensino_superior_2016.pdf). Access: July 2019.

The statistics make it clear that there has been an increase in the number of undergraduate students. This increase is associated with the main expansion trends already addressed above by Mancebo *et al.* (2015).

The official data presented are justified by the greater opportunities that have been offered to students with the implementation of programs that facilitate access to Higher Education, such as: the University for All Program (PROUNI), which is an initiative of the federal government to facilitate access to students in Higher Education; the Student Financing Program (FIES), which is a program of the Ministry of Education that finances higher education courses that are not free and have a positive evaluation; the National High School Exam (Enem); the intensification of courses in the Distance Education (DE) modality and; the creation of new federal institutions and courses that occurred with the implementation of the Support Program for Federal University Restructuring and Expansion Plans (REUNI).

### **The expansion of private higher education**

PROUNI was implemented in mid-2004. The program aims to promote the public policy of access to Higher Education for low-income students. It was the main plan in the Lula government for the democratization of this type of education, with articulation of fiscal policy, offering benefits of full or partial scholarships to guarantee the entry of students.

The condition for obtaining a PROUNI scholarship is to have a family income per capita of a maximum of three minimum wages, with at least 400 average points in the National High School Exam (ENEM) and have attended high school in a public school or in particular in the scholarship.

Scholarship students are offered only benefits and not rights that guarantee their permanence. The fact that the student is exempt from tuition does not guarantee that he will be able to maintain his expenses with other academic expenses, such as food, photocopying, materials, as well as transportation. As much as the university is free, the student always has other expenses to be able to keep studying.

In an attempt to contribute to these costs, as of Law 11,180 of 23 of September, 2005, the government started to grant the permanent scholarship. Despite being an important initiative, it is insufficient, as it does not reach all students in need. Only students with full scholarships, in presential courses, with a minimum duration of six semesters, with an average workload of 6 hours of class or more per day are benefited. In order to claim the benefit, it is

necessary to participate in the selection process of students eligible for such receipt, which takes place on a monthly basis. The benefit covers all months of the year.

In addition to PROUNI, entry into private institutions is also possible through the Student Financing program (FIES). The program is intended to finance the studies of in-person private institutions. Students who have obtained an arithmetic average equal to or greater than 450 points in the ENEM tests and a non-zero grade in the essay can hire this program.

These programs can be considered favorable because they create more access possibilities. In addition, the fact that the expansion also occurs through private institutions shows the responsibility of the State, which is to ensure the right to education for all.

Almeida *et al.* (2012), analyze this expansion through the “massification-democratization” binomial. According to these authors, the expansion of Higher Education is still not enough to guarantee the necessary democratization that includes education of quality and equality. For this to become a reality, structural changes must take place. The expansion places in Higher Education the heterogeneity of students and institutions cannot standardize their practices, norms and procedures.

The expansion of access occurred due to the expansion of private higher education institutions, which generated greater opportunities for the Brazilian population. The creation of private institutions shows a new structure, functioning and purpose of conceiving Higher Education, which Almeida *et al.* (2012) characterize as diversification and institutional differentiation.

Based on articles 16 and 20 of LDBN/1996, Silva (2007) defines the structure and composition of Higher Education in Brazil in three systems, each with its own operation and financing: the federal system, which is constituted by the Federal Education Institutions Superior, maintained by the Union, universities, university centers and colleges; the state, which is under the jurisdiction of state systems and; the municipal. Private institutions form a group with a difference in structure because they are maintained by one or more individuals or legal entities in which the for-profit stands out.

Spatti *et al.* (2016), analyze the transformations of the Brazilian public university that occurred with the commercialization of Higher Education. The authors point out that the university has neglected its role as a social institution because it is increasingly inserted in the logic of capitalist economics as a service provider. Thus, Higher Education has a productivist and commercial character, according to an operational organization model (CHAUÍ, 2003).

## The expansion of public higher education

The 2001 National Education Plan (PNE) consolidates the provisions of Article 205 of the 1988 Federal Constitution, in which education is defined as a right for all and a duty of the State. Among the goals established by the PNE (2001- 2010), was the increase in the number of students served at all levels of Higher Education. In this context, including to meet the provisions of the PNE and the Education Development Plan (PDE), in 2007 the Support Program for Federal University Restructuring and Expansion Plans (REUNI) was created, whose main objective was to expand the access and permanence of students in Higher Education.

According to data reported in the REUNI implementation report, published by the Ministry of Education on 30 October, 2009 with the title "Reuni 2008 - First Year Report", the program had an investment in two phases of 1.5 billion, the which allowed the creation of new vacancies for admission, new undergraduate courses, new vacancies for hiring professors and administrative technicians, granting of scholarships for postgraduate studies, in addition to the expansion of the campus. The report showed that, in addition to meeting the targets, there were also cases of exceeding expectations. According to a report at the end of 2007, all Brazilian institutions had already voluntarily joined the program.

The guidelines for REUNI, described in Article 2 of Decree no. 6,096/2007, were structured in six dimensions, namely: Expansion of the Public Higher Education Offer; Academic-Curricular Restructuring; Pedagogical Renewal of Higher Education; Intra and Inter-Institutional Mobility; Institutional Social Commitment and Postgraduate Support to the development and qualitative improvement of undergraduate courses, with the university having the responsibility to propose actions for sub-items of all dimensions. Among the objectives that have been outlined for expanding access to education is the creation of evening courses in order to meet social demand.

According to Lamers *et al.* (2017), the disapproval of an evening dentistry course inserted by the expansion policy at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul UFRGS, deserves to be highlighted, because of the 121 students participating in the research, 49 are in a situation of retention, which represents a total of 40.5% of students. In addition to failures, dropouts accounted for 19.9% of the total number of students.

Cañaverall and Sá (2017), also verified evasion in undergraduate courses at the Federal University of Alfenas UNIFAL-MG. According to the authors, the compus-headquarters had in 2013 a dropout rate of 42.6%, specifically in the dentistry course, to compare with the study



by Lamers (2017), the dropout rate was 16.8%, that is, 3.1% less. The courses with the highest dropout rate were undergraduate teaching degrees and humanities courses, so the authors came to the hypothesis that dropout is linked to the cut-off point for entering Higher Education, the lower the competition in the course, the greater the dropout rate. Thus, it appears that REUNI does not intervene in the occupation of vacancies.

These studies are justified by the importance of students staying in undergraduate courses, therefore, the intention is not to consider specific cases as a trend, but to use them as a way of discussing elements to consolidate students' permanence in Higher Education.

For the authors, the creation of evening undergraduate courses at federal institutions requires diversified adaptations and particular demands that the institutions may not contemplate. Generally, those who attend these courses carry out paid activities during the day. Thus, it is necessary to reconcile work and study. In this sense, Souza and Reinert (2010) point out that the teachers' work is a strong requirement for students' performance and permanence. When teachers use appropriate didactics and methods, they mobilize students' interest.

Some authors criticize the expansion of Higher Education proposed by REUNI because they believe that quantity is not associated with the quality of education (CAÑAVERAL; SÁ, 2017; SOARES; SAMPAIO, 2013). The term of REUNI provided an opportunity to increase vacancies as proposed. However, it generated and accentuated some problems such as student dropout, which was identified and discussed by Lamers *et al.* (2017).

It should be noted, therefore, that REUNI offers a possibility for innovation in the Higher Education scenario, but the quantity must accompany the quality, contemplating conditions that favor students as well as the work of teachers.

## Final considerations

Higher Education is an important means of producing scientific knowledge for technological advancement in a society. As an educational and scientific principle, the university consists of teaching, research and extension.

According to Trindade (2000), in order to seek new paths for Higher Education, it is essential to understand university processes and government policies. It is up to the government to define public educational policies. The university community has a responsibility to discuss such policies widely and to assess their implications.

Quality knowledge and education are human rights and cannot be evaded or neglected. The growth in the number of enrollments and the democratization of access for students who

are socially and economically disadvantaged in higher education institutions in recent decades have occurred through the provision of programs such as PROUNI, FIES and REUNI. They are important, but still insufficient to guarantee the universalization of the right to public and quality Higher Education.

On the other hand, there is now a strong tendency on the part of many private institutions to promote capitalist logic, transforming education into a kind of commodity.

Another fundamental point discussed in this study refers to REUNI's expansion policy. In order to increase the number of enrollments in undergraduate courses at federal universities via REUNI, a management contract was created with the MEC, through which the government committed itself to increase resources in the order of 20% with funding and personal expenses. As a result, the number of students would increase, the curriculum would be more flexible, distance education would be used and short courses would be created. However, this program was criticized because it provided an increase in students, but it did not keep up with the proportional growth of teachers and technicians, which intensified the teaching work.

All this problem related to the expansion of Higher Education deserves greater discussion and engagement by university communities to put into practice public policies that guarantee not only access, but educational quality and the permanence of all. More than a partial democratization, it is necessary to fight for the universalization of the conditions of access, permanence and, mainly, for the professional and citizen quality of Higher Education.

It is indisputable that changes occurred with the expansion in Higher Education and that favored economic and social aspects. There was a process of democratization, which is essential at this level of education, since for many years universities reflected the elitist character of education. The expansion of Higher Education also contributed to the regional development where the new institutions were installed.

Finally, for the expansion of quality in Higher Education to occur, the State, the National Education System and society as a whole must be committed.

The theme is complex. Hence the importance of broadening the discussion and proposing debates on a topic of political and social relevance to understand the organization, the essence and the meanings of the transformations that have been occurring in Brazilian Higher Education.

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