

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRAZIL: THE STORY
OF A SLOW AND UNFINISHED EXPERIENCE

A DEMOCRATIZAÇÃO DO ENSINO SUPERIOR NO BRASIL: A HISTÓRIA DE UMA
EXPERIÊNCIA LENTA E INACABADA

LA DEMOCRATIZACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR EN BRASIL: LA
HISTORIA DE UNA EXPERIENCIA LENTA E INCONCLUSA



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How to reference this article:

Rückert, F. Q., Rabelo, J. A. A., & Fernandez, L. S. (2026). The democratization of higher education in Brazil: the story of a slow and unfinished experience. *Revista on line de Política e Gestão Educacional*, 30, e026006. <https://doi.org/10.22633/rpge.v30i00.21003>.



| Submitted: 25/01/2026

| Revisions required: 10/02/2026

| Approved: 22/02/2026

| Published: 18/03/2026

Editor: Prof. Dr. Sebastião de Souza Lemes

Deputy Executive Editor: Prof. Dr. José Anderson Santos Cruz

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the expansion of Higher Education in Brazil in the period following the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution. Based on a literature review focused on the role of the public and private sectors in expanding enrollment, we present a critical reflection on the democratization of Higher Education. The review was based on the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) database and included an initial set of 8 articles published between 2020 and 2025. The set of reviewed texts was expanded to include academic works published before 2020. Theoretically, we pay special attention to Dubet's considerations regarding meritocracy and inequalities, and highlight Barbosa's research on horizontal stratification in Higher Education. The results indicate that the changes that have occurred in Higher Education in Brazil constitute an incomplete democratization marked by the persistence of asymmetries.

KEYWORDS: Higher education. Expansion of enrollments. Inequalities. Democratization.

RESUMO: O artigo aborda a expansão do Ensino Superior no Brasil no período posterior à promulgação da Constituição Federal de 1988. A partir de uma revisão bibliográfica centrada no papel do poder público e do setor privado na ampliação da oferta de matrículas, apresentamos uma reflexão crítica sobre a democratização do Ensino Superior. A revisão foi baseada no banco de dados da Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) e contemplou um conjunto inicial de 08 artigos publicados entre 2020 e 2025. O conjunto de textos revisados foi ampliado com a incorporação trabalhos acadêmicos que foram publicados antes de 2020. No plano teórico, concedemos especial atenção às considerações de Dubet a respeito da meritocracia e das desigualdades e destacamos as pesquisas de Barbosa sobre a estratificação horizontal no Ensino Superior. Os resultados indicam que as mudanças ocorridas no Ensino Superior no Brasil configuram uma democratização incompleta e marcada pela persistência de assimetrias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino Superior. Expansão das matrículas. Desigualdades. Democratização.

RESUMEN: Este artículo aborda la expansión de la Educación Superior en Brasil en el periodo posterior a la promulgación de la Constitución Federal de 1988. A partir de una revisión bibliográfica centrada en el papel de los sectores público y privado en la expansión de la matrícula, presentamos una reflexión crítica sobre la democratización de la Educación Superior. La revisión se basó en la base de datos Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) e incluyó un conjunto inicial de 8 artículos publicados entre 2020 y 2025. El conjunto de textos revisados se amplió para incluir trabajos académicos publicados antes de 2020. Teóricamente, prestamos especial atención a las consideraciones de Dubet sobre meritocracia y desigualdades, y destacamos la investigación de Barbosa sobre la estratificación horizontal en la Educación Superior. Los resultados indican que los cambios ocurridos en la Educación Superior en Brasil constituyen una democratización incompleta, marcada por la persistencia de asimetrías.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación superior. Expansión de la matrícula. Desigualdades. Democratización.

INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the democratization of Higher Education in Brazil following the enactment of the Federal Constitution of 1988 (Constituição Federal de 1988) involves a distinction between public and private Higher Education Institutions (Instituições de Ensino Superior - IES). This distinction is necessary because the expansion of enrollments in Higher Education programs occurred in both the private and public sectors.

In 2021, the Higher Education Census recorded 8.9 million enrollments; of this total, 76.9% represents assignments of private institutions. The same Census recorded 2.261 private institutions and 313 public institutions (Brasil, 2021). The results collected by the government in 2021 revealed a process of disproportionate growth between private and public Institutions. This setting was already being designed during the Civil-Military Regime (Cunha, 2000); it strengthened during the neoliberal reforms in Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government (Cunha, 2003; Carvalho, 2011) and intensified in this first quarter of the 21st century (Carvalho, 2013; Assis; Oliveira, 2023). According to Mancebo et al. (2015, p. 35, our translation)⁴:

Between 1995 and 2010, Brazil experienced a growth of 262.52% in the total number of enrollments. However, what undeniably expanded the most during this period were enrollments in private institutions, which grew by 347.15%, while in the public system the increase was only 134.58%.

Part of the marked growth highlighted by the authors was a policy's consequence of allocating public funds to private higher education institutions – a policy that was intensified through social programs such as the Student Financing Fund for Higher Education (Fundo de Financiamento ao Estudante de Ensino Superior - FIES) and the University for All Program (Programa Universidade para Todos - PROUNI), in which students from low-income families receive financial aid through government programs to pursue and continue their higher education studies even in private institutions. Granted a substantial volume of public funds over the past decades, higher education institutions have also benefited from the policy that diversify undergraduate programs and by the implementation of Distance Education (Educação à Distância - EaD) the Higher Education Institutions has sparked debates between proponents and critics of this practice.

⁴ All translations from Portuguese to English in this text are by the authors.

In the literature on higher education policies in Brazil, there is a broad discussion about the role of public funding in the expansion of private Higher Education Institutions. Among the various studies addressing this debate, we highlight Cristina Helena Almeida de Carvalho's doctoral dissertation, titled 'A política pública para a educação superior no Brasil (1995-2008): ruptura e/ou continuidade?' (Carvalho, 2011); Aline Rodrigues Alves Rocha's doctoral dissertation, titled 'Políticas Expansionistas e a dualidade educacional na Educação Superior: um estudo sobre FIES e PROUNI' (Rocha, 2023); and Matheus Lucas Silva de Souza's master's thesis, titled 'Programa de Financiamento Estudantil (FIES) no contexto do Plano Nacional de Educação (2014-2024)' (Souza, 2021). In terms of journal articles, we consider the works published by Silveira and Bianchetti (2016); Silva and Santos (2017); Assis and Oliveira (2023); among others, to be relevant to the scope of our research.

In the subsequent section of this article, we shall examine specific dimensions of the protracted debate on the public funding of higher education institutions—a phenomenon widely identified in the scholarly literature as the “commodification of Higher Education.” Within this introductory section of the study, it is considered pertinent to acknowledge that private higher education institutions have likewise made a substantive contribution to the democratization of Higher Education.

In its broader scope, the participation of the private sector does not fall within the purview of this study, as the analysis is primarily focused on the phenomenon as it occurs in public higher education institutions, and, more specifically, within the framework of the National Student Assistance Policy (Política Nacional de Assistência Estudantil - PNAES), a brazilian government program designed to ensure access, retention, and academic success for low-income students in public higher education institutions, implemented in federal higher education since 2010.

The established thematic focus directs our attention to the realm of public higher education, relieving us of the challenging task of examining the role of private Higher Education (HE) institutions in the “democratization” of higher education in Brazil. At the same time, however, it presents a dual challenge: on one hand, the need to conduct a critical analysis of the organization and functioning of the public higher education system; and on the other, the imperative to reflect on the limitations and obstacles confronting the process of “democratization” of higher education.

We will tackle the two challenges outlined above using the following textual strategy: first, we will highlight key aspects of the current configuration of the brazilian higher education

system; subsequently, we will review interpretations from the Sociology of Education concerning the “democratization” of higher education, both in Brazil and internationally.

BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS: DISPARITIES IN THE EXPANSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRAZIL

In this section, we opt to distinguish between the expansion in enrollments in higher education programs and the broader process of democratizing Higher Education in Brazil. From our perspective, the growth in enrollments has indeed increased the participation of poorer segments of the population in undergraduate and graduate programs; nevertheless, it has not eradicated pronounced socioeconomic and racial disparities among higher education students, nor has it addressed differences in competitiveness among programs, or substantially reduced educational inequalities across the five macro-regions of Brazil. Under these circumstances, it would be inaccurate to equate the observed increase in enrollments with a genuine democratization of Brazilian higher education.

In the Brazilian context, it is important to acknowledge that the expansion of enrollments encompassed the three types of institutions that constitute higher education: public institutions (federal, state, or municipal), private confessional institutions, and private for-profit institutions. Despite their differences, private institutions are often treated as a single category. As a result, the conventional distinction between public and private Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] remains predominant.

It should be emphasized that, although the distinction between public and private HEIs frequently appears in the literature and political debates, its division is overly simplistic and obscures the diversity of institutions offering Higher Education in Brazil. Public HE entities account for approximately 22% of enrollments, provide a substantial number of programs that demand significant investment in student formation, and host a considerable share of the research produced in the country (Senkevics, 2021). Private HEIs, by contrast, serve around 78% of higher education students, prioritize low-cost courses, exhibit lower quality indicators, and generally target segments of the population with lower per capita income (Carvalho, 2013; Salto, 2018). Within this group, there exist for-profit institutions operating as business conglomerates, as well as non-profit institutions (philanthropic and confessional) that offer high-quality programs and maintain a prominent role in both extension and research activities (Senkevics et al., 2023).

In recent decades, the growth rate of HE organizations operating as business conglomerates has been more pronounced than that of philanthropic and confessional ones.

The expansion of for-profit private HEIs with lower selectivity in admissions cannot be separated from the higher education policy adopted by Brazil in the 1990s, during the two presidential terms of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC). In 1994, through a document entitled “Mãos à obra,”⁵ the FHC government presented a program to promote private higher education based on three key points:

- a) the reform of the authorization system for institutions and programs, which was considered restrictive and contributed little to enhancing competition in the sector; b) the establishment of criteria for allocating public resources to community higher education institutions; and c) the restructuring of student loan programs (Carvalho, 2015, p. 59).

With the aim of establishing mechanisms to monitor higher education efficiency—both public and private—in 1996 the Ministry of Education (Ministério da Educação - MEC) issued Ordinance No. 249/1996 (Portaria nº 249/1996), creating the National Course Examination (Exame Nacional de Cursos) (Brasil, 1996a). That same year, through Decree No. 2,026/1996 (Decreto nº 2.026/1996), the federal government set forth the procedures for evaluating courses and HEIs (Brasil, 1996b).

In line with the neoliberal orientation toward reducing public expenditures, the federal government cut investments in public higher education institutions while, at the same time, eased the criteria for establishing new private colleges and universities, promoted the creation of new programs, authorized the expansion of distance education, and, through tax exemptions and the Student Financing Program, channeled public resources to boost enrollment in the private sector (Cunha, 2003; Carvalho, 2015). Taking advantage of a favorable political climate and a repressed demand—driven by the growing number of Brazilians completing secondary education—private HE institutions multiplied between 1996 and 2004, increasing from 711 to 1,789 institutions, while enrollment rose from 1,133,102 to 2,985,405 during the same period (Guerra & Fernandes, 2009, p. 204).

During the political negotiations that led to the approval of the National Education Plan (Plano Nacional de Educação - PNE), that is a strategic public policy framework established by

⁵ An expression in Brazilian Portuguese that means “Let’s get to work”.

the Brazilian government to guide the formulation and implementation of education policies across the country, enacted through Law No. 10,172/2001 (Lei nº 10.172/2001) (Brazil, 2001), debates emerged regarding the need for public policies targeting populations affected by discrimination. Subsequently, in the final year of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration, the Executive Branch issued a provisional measure to promote racial diversity in higher education. This provisional measure resulted in Law No. 10,558/2002 (Lei nº 10.558/2002), which established the Diversity in the University Program (Programa Diversidade na Universidade) (Carvalho, 2015, p. 69)⁶.

Overall, the higher education policy implemented during President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration led to a diversification of programs, significantly increased enrollment in the private sector, and brought to the agenda— albeit at a late stage —the discussion on the need for affirmative actions to ensure greater racial representation in the higher education system. However, by reducing resources for public HE entities and prioritizing a market-driven logic, it “ended up making higher education even more unequal and heterogeneous, [...]” (Assis & Oliveira, 2023, pp. 31–32, our translation).

Between January 1, 2003, and January 1, 2011, the Presidency of the Republic was held by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Under his administration, national higher education policy oscillated between continuity and change. In terms of continuity, it is worth highlighting the use of the Student Financing Program as an instrument to fund private higher education; the improvement of program evaluation through the National Student Performance Exam (Exame Nacional de Desempenho dos Estudantes – ENADE); the creation of the Unified Selection System (Sistema de Seleção Unificada – SISU) in 2010 (Brazil, 2010b); the establishment of the National Higher Education Evaluation System (Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Superior – SINAES); and the transfer of public resources to HE institutions through the University for All Program (Programa Universidade para Todos – PROUNI), implemented by Provisional Measure No. 213 (Medida Provisória nº 213), published on September 13, 2004, and sanctioned by Law No. 11,096/2005 (Lei nº 11.096/2005) (Brazil, 2005).

At the operational level, PROUNI differed from Student Financing Program - FIES because it did not rely on bank loans, which generated debt for the students who benefited. It

⁶ According to Carvalho (2015, p. 69, our translation), the provisional measure that resulted in Law No. 10,558/2002 (Lei Nº 10.558/2002) was implemented with the aim of meeting a requirement of the Inter-American Development Bank (Banco Interamericano de Desenvolvimento – BID).

also differed in that it was based on the logic of granting tax exemptions to private HE institutions in exchange for scholarships for low-income students.

The implementation of PROUNI sparked disagreements between supporters and critics of the use of public resources in private HE organizations. Among the supporters were private universities and colleges interested in tax exemptions and filling vacant spots, as well as politicians and bureaucrats from the government base who presented PROUNI as an advancement in the process of democratizing Higher Education. Among the critics were public HE entities and unions representing higher education faculty and staff, who advocated for prioritizing public education and warned of the risks of the “marketization” of Higher Education.

It is not our objective to delve into this discussion, as it is too broad and complex; however, we believe it is pertinent to note the absence of a consensus regarding PROUNI. For some authors, such as Pinto (2004), Trópia (2009), Carvalho (2013), and Miranda (2017), among others, despite being justified by the need to expand access to Higher Education for low-income populations, PROUNI benefited private HE institutions—especially for-profit institutions; stimulated competition among business groups that prioritize profit over teaching quality; aligned with an instrumentalist conception of education; and, indirectly, reinforced the mistaken idea that the public sector is more efficient than the private sector. Other authors, such as Sguissardi (2006) and Rocha (2023), interpreted PROUNI as a reduction of the State’s responsibilities and as an advancement of neoliberal policies. Corbucci (2004, p. 698, our translation), in turn, interpreted PROUNI as “an initiative, albeit timid, of indirect income redistribution, by transferring tax exemption resources to poorer population strata, since such resources, if collected, would not necessarily benefit these social groups.”

A more critical interpretation of the use of public funds to finance the expansion of enrollments in private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can be found in Paz and Sada (2025, p. 13). The authors argue that programs such as FIES and PROUNI “restrict access to quality public universities and legitimize neoliberal projects that exert control over the sphere of education.” In their view, by neglecting the social role of the Public University, the government reinforces a neoliberal and productivist rationality, through which the “appropriation of public assets is disguised by the welfare-oriented character of certain actions and programs [...]” (Paz & Sada, 2025, p. 13).

Despite the lack of consensus regarding the advantages or disadvantages of PROUNI and the debate on the quality of the programs offered, in practice, the University for All Program

simultaneously expanded access to private higher education for low-income students and increased the volume of public resources transferred to private HE institutions.

Regarding the changes in national higher education policy promoted by the Lula administration, in our view, the most relevant were, in chronological order: (i) Support Program for Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (Programa de Apoio a Planos de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais – REUNI) (Brazil, 2007a); (ii) the creation of the National Student Assistance Program (Programa Nacional de Assistência Estudantil – PNAES) (Brazil, 2007b); (iii) the approval of Law No. 11,892 of December 29, 2008, which established the Federal System of Professional, Scientific, and Technological Education (Rede Federal de Educação Profissional, Científica e Tecnológica) (Brazil, 2008); and (iv) the enactment of Law No. 12,711 (Lei nº 12,711) of August 29, 2012, popularly known as the Quota Law (Lei de Cotas) (Brazil, 2012).

The creation of Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities Program - REUNI was part of a political strategy through which the federal government sought to strengthen and expand the Federal Institutions of Higher Education System while simultaneously implementing new forms of performance control over these institutions IFES. Established through Decree No. 6,096 (Decreto nº 6,096) of April 24, 2007, REUNI set forth

as a global goal the gradual increase of the average completion rate of on-campus undergraduate programs to ninety percent and the ratio of undergraduate students in on-campus programs per professor to eighteen, within five years from the start of each plan. (Brazil, 2007, Article 1, § 1)

The decree establishing REUNI defined guidelines that had to be met by IFES seeking access to the resources provided by the program. The guidelines—listed in Article 2—included: “reducing dropout rates, filling vacant spots, and increasing intake, especially during the evening period”; flexibility in curricula to ensure student mobility between institutions and programs; “diversification of undergraduate modalities”; and the “expansion of inclusion and student assistance policies” (Brazil, 2007).

The conception guiding REUNI was based on the idea that the efficiency indicators established by the Ministry of Education - MEC⁷ would positively impact the quality of services offered by IFES while simultaneously enabling an expansion in the number of available places. Following this conception, the MEC offered an additional 20% in financial resources to IFES that accepted the established targets (Lima, 2013, p. 259). The proposal received criticism from the National Union of Higher Education Faculty (Sindicato Nacional dos Docentes das Instituições de Ensino Superior - Andes –SN). However, the criticisms did not prevent the widespread participation of IFES in REUNI. By the end of 2007, 53 of the 54 IFES submitted the necessary documents to participate in the program (Paula & Almeida, 2020, p. 1.062).

The implementation of REUNI was considered a positive and necessary political action by the National Association of Leaders of Federal Higher Education Institutions (Associação Nacional dos Dirigentes das Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior – Andifes), but, on the other hand, it received criticism from union sectors and the Students Union (Lima, 2013, pp. 259–260). The criticisms were directed at the risk of precarizing the work of faculty and staff at IFES and warned against the mistake of prioritizing the expansion of enrollment over a higher education system that, constitutionally, must inseparably fulfill teaching, research, and extension activities (Lugão, 2011; Lima, 2013; Bittencourt & Ferreira, 2014).

The existence of divergences in interpretations regarding REUNI does not prevent us from recognizing that the program enabled a budgetary increase for federal HE institutions while simultaneously producing one of the effects desired by the MEC: the expansion of the number of students enrolled in the federal Higher Education System. In Table 01, we present data on the expansion of enrollment in public and private HE entities between 2002 and 2016, highlighting with an asterisk the five-year period corresponding to REUNI's validity (2007–2012).

With regard to the National Student Assistance Policy (PNAES), it initially took shape through Ordinance No. 39, issued by the Ministry of Education (MEC) in 2007 (Brazil, 2007c). It was later implemented through Presidential Decree No. 7,234/2010 (Brazil, 2010c). The main purpose of PNAES is to promote social inclusion within the Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES) through actions aimed at encouraging student retention and reducing dropout and repetition rates (Kowalski, 2012; Recktenvald et al., 2018). According to Decree No.

⁷ The set of indicators proposed by REUNI was based on the concepts of projected enrollment, retention factor by field of knowledge, course completion rate, equivalent faculty pool, and student-to-faculty ratio (Paula & Almeida, 2020, our translation).

7,234/2010, PNAES covers the following areas: student housing, food services, transportation, health care, digital inclusion, culture, sports, childcare, academic support, and access, participation, and learning support for students with disabilities, pervasive developmental disorders, and high abilities/giftedness. Funded with federal resources, PNAES is structured as a decentralized policy, since defining priorities and allocating resources among the ten areas provided for in the Program is the responsibility of the IFES.

Table 1
Enrollment numbers in public and private HE Institutions

Ano	Public HE Institutions		Private HE Institutions		Total
	Enrollments	%	Enrollments	%	
2002	1.100.751	30,99%	2.459.955	61,9%	3.560.706
2003	1.194.748	30,0%	2.788.618	70,0%	3.983.366
2004	1.227.682	28,7%	3.042.772	71,3%	4.270.454
2005	1.261.157	27,3%	3.353.543	72,7%	4.615.060
2006	1.269.924	25,79%	3.666.205	74,3%	4936.129
2007	1.343.714	25,4%	3.944.240	74,6%	5.287.954
2008	1.556.781	26,7%	4.277.806	73,3%	5.834.587
2009	1.525.190	25,5%	4.459.843	74,5%	5.985.033
2010	1.627.742	25,5%	4.763.266	74,5%	6.391.008
2011	1.756.728	26,0%	4.991.682	74,0%	6.748.410
2012	1.753.178	24,9%	5.282.266	75,1%	7.035.444
2013	1.778.367	24,4%	5.520.782	75,6%	7.811.445
2014	1.826.062	23,4%	5.991.383	76,6%	7.811.445
2015	1.851.741	23,1%	6.152.731	76,9%	8.004.472
2016	1.888.213	23,5%	6.131.790	76,5%	8.020.003

Note. Adapted from Santos et al. (2020, p. 33).

Backed by the Federal Constitution of 1988, which defines education as a social right and establishes the State's commitment to addressing social inequalities (Brazil, 1988), the National Student Assistance Program (PNAES) prioritizes students entering Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES) under disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions and aims to ensure opportunities for success in higher education for a socially vulnerable segment of the population (Lima & Mendes, 2020; Martins et al., 2019).

At the same time that PNAES was implemented to address the issue of dropout among low-income students enrolled in IFES, the federal government was also exploring ways to expand the provision of technical and vocational secondary education, a sector of the national public education system that also involved the interests of state governments and the private sector. In that context, one available alternative was the use of federal resources to strengthen

the former Federal Centers for Technological Education (CEFETs) (Azevedo et al., 2012). Another option discussed at the time was the creation of a federal funding program specifically aimed at state schools offering technical and vocational secondary education. The establishment of new technological universities, similar to the Federal Technological University of Paraná, was also considered by the Ministry of Education (Righes & Sarturi, 2021). However, these alternatives did not fully meet the federal government's priorities.

Broadly speaking, the Union's priorities were presented by the Ministry of Education in December 2007, in the document entitled *Technical Professional Education at the Secondary Level Integrated with Upper Secondary Education* (Brazil, 2007c). Based on the ideas outlined in this document, and with the aim of reconciling the expansion of federal investment in technical education with the increase in the number of places in public higher education, the federal government enacted Law No. 11,892/2008. Through this law, it carried out a dual political movement: on the one hand, it established the Federal Network for Scientific and Technological Education (RFEPCT), and on the other, it ensured the creation of the Federal Institutes (IFs)⁸.

The establishment of the RFEPCT⁹ and the creation of the IFs simultaneously impacted both the secondary education system and the higher education system. According to Article 2 of Law No. 11,892/2008, the IFs "are institutions of higher, basic, and professional education," endowed with "administrative, patrimonial, financial, didactic-pedagogical, and disciplinary autonomy," and equivalent to Federal Universities (Brazil, 2008, Art. 2).

The law creating the IFs established "a distribution of 50% for technical courses, with priority given to Integrated Secondary Education (EMI)¹⁰, 20% for teacher education programs, and the remaining 30% for other programs: initial and continuing education (FIC), technological undergraduate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and graduate programs (both *stricto* and *lato sensu*)" (Brazorotto & Venco, 2021, p. 493). In these terms, although prioritizing secondary education integrated with professional, scientific, and technological training, the IFs also contributed to expanding the supply of places in higher education.

⁸ The set of indicators proposed by REUNI was based on the concepts of projected enrollment, retention factor by field of knowledge, course completion rate, pool of equivalent faculty positions, and student-to-faculty ratio (Paula & Almeida, 2020).

⁹ The Federal Network for Scientific and Technological Education comprises the Federal Technological University of Paraná (UTFPR), the Federal Centers for Technological Education (CEFETs) of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, the technical schools affiliated with Federal Universities, Colégio Pedro II, and the Federal Institutes (IFs) created following the enactment of Law No. 11,892/2008 (Silva & Batista, 2023).

¹⁰ The acronym EMI stands for Integrated Secondary Education.

Regarding the Quota Law, in general terms, it constitutes a federal regulation that establishes inclusive parameters, through the reservation of places, for access to IFES and to federal technical secondary education institutions linked to the Ministry of Education. As stated in its text, Law No. 12,711/2012 (Brazil, 2012) determines that 50% of the places in federal educational institutions must be allocated to students who completed their entire secondary education in public schools. Subsequently, it

establishes a second reservation of places, within the first contingent, aimed at two additional conditions: a minimum proportion of 50% of students from families with a monthly per capita income equal to or less than 1.5 minimum wages; and a proportion of self-declared Black, Brown, and Indigenous students (PPI) at least equal to the share of these groups in the federal unit where the institution is located. (Senkevics & Mello, 2019, p. 187)

The fact that Law No. 12,711/2012 is popularly known as the Quota Law (Brazil, 2012) allows us to infer that there is, in common sense, a simplified interpretation of this legal instrument. Without disregarding the extensive debate on the need for affirmative action to address racial inequality in higher education—an issue examined by authors such as Moehlecke (2002), Maggie and Fry (2004), Costa et al. (2012), and Passos (2015), among others—it is important to emphasize that the Quota Law sought to expand access for public school students to IFES and, at the same time, included students with disabilities. In this sense, beyond being an affirmative action policy, the Quota Law may also be interpreted as a political measure aimed at the democratization of higher education.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION AND THE MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES FOR INTERPRETING THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In the previous section, we pointed out the distinction between the expansion and the democratization of Higher Education. In the current section, we aim to reflect on this distinction by engaging with two authors who are relevant for understanding the changes that occurred in Higher Education in the second half of the last century and in the first decades of the current century. These authors are Dubet (2001, 2015) and Barbosa (2014, 2015, 2019).

The French sociologist François Dubet has an extensive academic output, and many of his studies have not been translated into Portuguese. Significant exceptions include the articles:

(i) Multiplied Inequalities (As desigualdades multiplicadas) (Dubet, 2001); (ii) Which Democratization of Higher Education? (Qual democratização do Ensino Superior?) (Dubet, 2015) (Dubet, 2015); and (iii) What Is a Just School? (O que é uma escola justa?) (Dubet, 2004).

In the article entitled Multiplied Inequalities, the author underscores the need for a sociological analysis of inequalities that is able to encompass the “experience of actors,” thereby moving beyond “the simple enumeration, however critical” (Dubet, 2001, p. 5, our translation). Reviewing the interpretations of inequalities formulated by authors such as Marx, Durkheim, Marshall, and Castel, among others, Dubet identified an important shift: gradually, the concept of social class lost significance in analyses of inequality, and in its place various forms of social stratification emerged. According to the author:

Today, the analysis of inequalities (not their mere description) is confronted with the separation between stratification and relations of domination, a separation of what the notion of “total” class was precisely intended to unify ... More than ever, it is not possible for us to construct reliable stratification scales based on the idea of antagonistic classes. (Dubet, 2001, p. 10)

Continuing the analysis of the changes in the perception of inequalities, the author acknowledges the existence of a growing interest in sociology in “micro-inequalities” and emphasizes that the modern expression of inequality deprives the poor of “the capacity to fully construct an identity for themselves” (Dubet, 2001, p. 14). Operating across multiple stratification categories, the modern expression of inequality tends to naturalize differences and reinforces the idea that success is the product of individual effort and meritocracy. From the perspective presented by the author, schools and universities play a role in the construction and reinforcement of social hierarchies, which coexist and are justified by the thesis of universal equality of opportunity.

Dubet’s interpretation of the modern expression of inequality seems relevant to us for understanding the democratization of Higher Education in Brazil, particularly because the author emphasizes that the behavior of the poor does not always conform to pre-established hierarchies. Referring to the behavior of French youth, he states:

The poor do not accept being reduced to the status of social cases, being ignored, and, above all, being compelled to assert themselves as subjects endowed with projects at the

very moment when such capacity is taken from them. High school students perceive school hierarchies as chains of contempt.

Thus, some students decide that they will not make an effort so that their performance does not call into question their worth, their fundamental equality: they “decided” to fail at school, which would spare them from being affected by their failures ... Students negotiate a limited school conformism in exchange for average grades that ensure them a peaceful survival within the system ... Other students break the game through violence, which appears as the only means of rejecting the negative self-image produced by their failure and their freedom. (Dubet, 2001, p. 17)

The behavior of the poor in the face of “school hierarchies” allows us to refute the naive and somewhat romantic idea that all young people wish to enter Higher Education. Such a desire does not occur in France, does not occur in Brazil, and possibly does not occur in any other country. Conversely, it is likely that “school conformism” has become the choice of many poor youths in the face of the violence of the “meritocratic” model of schooling¹¹.

In the article entitled Which Democratization of Higher Education? the sociologist asserts that access to Higher Education “is more democratic when secondary education is broadly accessible and when students have a good level and relative equality of performance.” In the absence of these elements, secondary education is unequal, and “access to higher education is very little democratic” (Dubet, 2015, p. 258). The latter case characterizes the reality of Brazil, since our Basic Education system remains marked by disparities operating at two levels: on the one hand, there are disparities between public and private education; on the other hand, there are disparities in the quality of education provided within the public Basic Education system.

The advances achieved in Brazilian Elementary Education have not eliminated the difficulties in completing Secondary Education and accessing Higher Education. Barbosa (2015, p. 259) states that “there would be a clear positive association between household income and the chances of completing higher education. Also, the higher the maternal education, the greater the likelihood of completing higher education.”

Inequalities originating in Brazilian Basic Education and the continued high dropout rates in Secondary Education are exacerbated by the existence of a hierarchy among Higher

¹¹ In the article titled “*What Is a Just School?*”, Dubet (2004) offers an interesting reflection on the dynamics of the meritocratic system and its effects on young people’s education.

Education Institutions and by the strength of an “academic meritocracy” that directs the students with the best performance in selection processes to the top Higher Education universities and to the most competitive courses. In the case of Brazil, competition for access to places tends to be more intense in public institutions and in bachelor’s degree programs, particularly in courses that enjoy higher social prestige, such as Medicine, Law, and Engineering, among others. According to Barbosa (2019, p. 244):

Enrollment in bachelor’s degree programs has remained around 67.00% since the 1996 LDB, which introduced technological courses (experiencing strong growth—from 2.30% of enrollments in 2001 to 14.30% in 2015) and regularized teacher education programs, which experienced a slight decline during the same period (from 21.37% of enrollments to 18.10%).

The distinction between the demand for bachelor’s programs, technological programs, and teaching degrees in Brazil, along with the pattern of low selectivity for admission in private higher education institutions, constitute key elements for understanding the stratification of Brazilian Higher Education. Nevertheless, this stratification acquires greater complexity when factors such as the following are taken into account: (i) students’ socioeconomic background; (ii) gender- and race-related disparities in enrollment distribution; (iii) the higher dropout rates observed in technological programs and teaching degrees; (iv) the concentration of enrollments in teaching degrees and technological programs during evening courses, in contrast with the greater availability of bachelor’s programs during daytime courses; (v) the comparatively greater amount of study time typically available to bachelor’s students; (vi) the marked expansion of enrollments in Distance Education programs in teaching degrees and technological programs; and (vii) the unequal distribution of higher education enrollment rates across Brazil’s five macro-regions.

Considering the set of factors outlined above, we align with Dubet (2015, p. 58), who argues that: “The democratization of access to higher education depends not only on families’ financial resources and their cultural and academic capital, but also on the broader structure of the educational system.”

According to Dubet, there are different models of higher education. However, with regard to the selectivity of the students they serve, such models can be classified as either “malthusianos” systems (more rigorous and, to a certain extent, elitist) or more open systems,

which are consequently more flexible in their selection processes (Dubet, 2015). Considering this typology, we may infer that the Brazilian higher education system is hybrid, as it operates more rigorously in the selection of students admitted to public institutions and more flexibly in the selection of those entering private institutions.

The fact that the Brazilian higher education system is hybrid in terms of selectivity [being more “malthusianos” in the public sector and more 'open', and thus more flexible in admissions, in the private sector] offers an important clue for understanding the limits of democratization in Brazilian higher education. In our view, despite advances toward equity in access promoted by initiatives such as the creation of Unified Selection System (Sistema de Seleção Unificada - SISU), the Quota Law, and PNAES, the democratization of higher education in Brazil constitutes an incomplete and contradictory experience: incomplete because it neither eliminates the existing inequalities between private and public basic education nor alters the stratification within higher education; and contradictory because it has concentrated the majority of enrollments in private institutions.

In addition to being incomplete and contradictory, the intentionality behind the democratization of Brazilian higher education ultimately distributes unequally both employment opportunities and the salary benefits associated with university degrees. The dynamics of this unequal distribution were analyzed by Barbosa in the text 'Higher Education in Brazil: Credentials, Merit, and the Colonels'¹² (Barbosa, 2014). In this work, the author examines differences in salaries and social status between higher education graduates from bachelor's programs and those from Licenciaturas (undergraduate programs specifically designed for teacher training) and technological programs. Regarding salaries, over the past decades the gaps have narrowed, yet a favorable difference for bachelor's degree holders persists. Concerning social status, Barbosa identified a symbolic overvaluation of bachelor's programs to the detriment of licenciaturas and technological programs.

The differences in salaries and social status among undergraduate programs identified by Barbosa (2014; 2015) represent one aspect of the horizontal stratification phenomenon present in Brazilian higher education. Other aspects of the same phenomenon include (i) the high competition for access to certain degree programs; (ii) the predominance of bachelor's programs offered during daytime hours; and (iii) the greater presence of low-income students in Licenciaturas and private technological programs. These aspects, although distinct, generate

¹² The term 'Colonels' refers figuratively to the historical phenomenon of 'coronelismo' in Brazil, denoting local political and economic elites who wielded significant power and influence

inequalities within higher education and reinforce the idea of student meritocracy. Under these conditions,

schooling becomes a dominant criterion for social hierarchy, emphasizing the fact that, even though it is a more democratic principle than those prevailing in patrimonial societies, the definition of merit through education (even if universal and of high quality) constitutes a form of domination. (Barbosa, 2014, p. 65)

In practice, student meritocracy and horizontal stratification impact the organization and functioning of institutions offering undergraduate programs and hinder the advancement of higher education democratization in Brazil.

In this regard, we believe it is important to avoid an oversimplified interpretation of the phenomenon, particularly because the expansion of enrollments in Higher Education in Brazil following the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution coexisted with an increase in the number of Brazilians who completed secondary education and, consequently, expanded the share of the population eligible to apply for a place in higher education programs.

Salata, Bringhenti, and Miranda (2025) analyzed the social origins of students who entered undergraduate programs between 1992 and 2022 and identified fluctuations in the process of democratization of Higher Education. The authors examined data from the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) and focused their analysis on the social classification of young people aged 18 to 24 enrolled in Higher Education. Although they used an age bracket that does not encompass the entire population enrolled in Higher Education, the results obtained from logit models developed by the authors demonstrate that access to Higher Education among young people, within the 1992–2022 historical series, displayed three distinct dynamics:

1. 1. a substantial increase in inequalities between 1992 and 2004/2005; 2) a continuous and significant reduction in inequalities until approximately 2012–2015, depending on the measure used; 3) a renewed increase in inequalities until 2022, with varying intensity depending on the indicator of social origin adopted. (Salata et al, 2025, p. 26)

The persistence of inequalities of social origin in young people's access to Higher Education, as well as high dropout rates and the effects of horizontal stratification, are issues

discussed by several authors who investigate the Brazilian education system. Starting from different perspectives on the phenomenon and employing distinct analytical scales and procedures, most authors share a critical view of Brazilian Higher Education; some relativize the results of its democratization (Carvalho, 2013; 2015; Barbosa, 2014; 2019; Sguissardi, 2006; 2015; Mendonça et al., 2020; Silva & Santos, 2017; Paz & Sada, 2025), while others take a more radical stance, considering it a “myth” (Sá, 2022).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reflection developed throughout this article addresses two interrelated processes that, nonetheless, have distinct dynamics and produce different outcomes. The first process emerged with the gradual expansion of enrollments in higher education programs following the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution. The second concerns the persistence of asymmetries in access opportunities to higher education institutions and the unequal distribution of benefits generated by the training of higher education professionals.

The data presented show that the federal government implemented various actions aimed at expanding enrollments, while also seeking to promote the regionalization of Higher Education Institutions and the diversification of course offerings. Some of these actions involved private ones, while others were implemented in public institutions. Operating in a context of growing neoliberalism, the government’s role in higher education was characterized by a constant allocation of investments between the public and private sectors. The figures indicate that this distribution favored the private sector, as it increased its share of total enrollments.

The debate surrounding the commercialization of higher education in Brazil, present in the reviewed literature, does not prevent us from acknowledging the positive effects of enrollment expansion. In certain respects, this expansion—with all its limitations and contradictions—can be interpreted as a movement toward democratization. However, the Brazilian higher education system exhibits internal disparities that hinder equitable access to vacancies and produce horizontal stratification among programs.

Based on the analyzed evidence, we can infer that the democratization of Brazilian higher education remains incomplete, and its development faces resistance from student meritocracy and socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial inequalities. In this sense, despite the increase in enrollments in HE Institutions and the advances resulting from initiatives such as

the establishment of National High School Exam (ENEM) and Unified Selection System (SISU), the creation of the Quota Law, and the implementation of the National Student Assistance Policy, we believe that the path toward effective democratization of higher education in Brazil will still be long and challenging.

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CRediT Author Statement

- ☐ **Acknowledgements:** We acknowledge the institutional support of UFMS in the production and publication of this article.
 - ☐ **Funding:** The research underlying this article was funded by CAPES and FUNDECT-MS.
 - ☐ **Conflicts of interest:** None.
 - ☐ **Ethical approval:** This study did not require approval from an Ethics Committee.
 - ☐ **Data and material availability:** The data consulted are publicly available on the Internet.
 - ☐ **Authors' contribution:** All three participants are co-authors of the article.
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Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação
Proofreading, formatting, standardization and translation

