

Experimental universities in Brazil: a new model of access and public engagement in higher education? (0197)

A number of paradigms of the university can be observed through history and across regions. The introduction of the 'Humboldtian' model in 19th century Europe led to a union of teaching and research, the notion of academic freedom and a stronger link to the nation-state. Through the 20th century, new forms developed such as the 'multi-university' in the USA, and the 'developmental university' in some countries of Africa and Asia, both of which in distinct ways represented a stronger emphasis on the contributions of higher education to social and economic development at the local and national levels. More recently, commentators have observed the emergence of new paradigms such as the 'entrepreneurial' university (Barnett 1990; Coleman 1984; Kerr 1963; Slaughter & Leslie 1997).

Latin America has been strongly influenced by European notions of the university, particularly the 'Humboldtian' model. However, reforms undertaken in initially in the University of Córdoba in Argentina in 1918 ushered in a new era, leading to the emergence of a distinctively Latin American model. Bernasconi (2007) identifies the key characteristics of this model as being: democratic governance; social, economic and political mission; teaching, research and extension/service; democratisation of access; autonomy from the state; competitive selection of faculty; and original research by full-time professors.

In relation to other countries in Latin America, Brazil was a slow starter, with the first university only established in 1920. Despite the considerable expansion of higher education in recent years, with the total undergraduate population rising from just over 1.5 million in 1992 to 5.1 million in 2008 (a net enrolment rate of approximately 13%) (INEP 2009), the system is still characterised by extreme inequalities. Most of the expansion has taken place in newly formed private institutions, offering courses of questionable quality, with little research and few opportunities for broader learning beyond narrowly defined course content (Bertolin & Leite 2008; McCowan 2004). Access is limited to privileged groups in both the public and private sectors, due to highly competitive examinations in the former, and fees in the latter. On top of this, there are significant racial inequities, with low representation of African Brazilians and indigenous peoples.

However, there have been concerted efforts since 2002 to expand the federal university system as part of an initiative known as *Reuni*. This expansion has included the encouragement of new forms of teaching and curriculum, moving away from the transmission mode within isolated disciplines, and the establishment of new models of university aiming for a more equitable entry system and stronger commitment to social justice. Four of these new institutions that are highly distinctive and innovative form the focus of this paper:

- 1) Federal University of Amazonian Integration: located in the northern state of Pará, with a focus on interdisciplinary environmental study and research for sustainable development through cooperation between the countries of the Amazon region.
- 2) Federal University of Latin American Integration: located at the triple border of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, with a focus on regional cooperation, through a multi-national and multi-lingual student and faculty body.
- 3) Federal University of Luso-African-Brazilian Integration: located in the North-East, in the first town in Brazil to abolish slavery, with focus on cooperation between Portuguese speaking countries, offering opportunities particularly for students from Africa, and research oriented towards social development of these countries.
- 4) Federal University of the Southern Frontier: focus on the marginalized rural population of the Southern region, with research and community engagement programmes related to family agriculture.

While these universities have distinct foci, and are located in diverse regions of the country, they share number of common features. All have very recently been established (having been founded since 2009), share a commitment to expanding access to disadvantaged populations, developing new forms of interdisciplinary study, engaging with local communities and drawing on their knowledge systems, fostering international partnerships and orienting research towards local, national and international development needs.

This study explores the conceptions of the university underpinning these new institutions, assessing the ways in which they may challenge or reinforce established paradigms. Findings are presented from an initial exploratory study, drawing on interviews with members of senior management and academic staff, as well as documentary analysis, carried out in 2010-2011. Research has not as yet been carried out on these new universities, with the exception of journalistic reports and one conference paper on the Federal University of Latin American Integration (Motter & Gandin 2010).

This study identifies key departures of these new universities from national traditions and dominant global trends (as for example identified in Altbach et al. 2009), namely: provision of universal free-of-charge places and targeted maintenance grants; expansion of access to low-income students; engagement with local communities; internationalisation of the student body without economic motivation; research tied to local, national and international development needs; inter- and trans-disciplinary curricula; and fostering regional and international integration and cooperation. As such it represents aspects of the 'developmental' model of university referred to above, and of the 'Córdoba' model, but also introduces distinctive and innovative features.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain in resisting pressures towards marketisation of taught courses and commercialisation of research and societal engagement, given the prevailing global currents and uncertainties of the national political context. Finally, implications are drawn out for other countries facing the challenge of ensuring equitable access to higher education of quality in a rapidly expanding system.

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