

Assessment and Curricular Policies of Higher Education in Brazil: Enhancing both performance and cultural diversity?

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Abstract. The present paper posits that in culturally diverse societies such as Brazil the value of cultural diversity within higher education institutions, faculties, and students has begun to gain momentum as a relevant dimension in the assessment of quality, performance, and productivity. In order to develop this argument, it first reviews the supporting literature, offering an overview of the institutional structures of higher education in Brazil and its quality assessment practices. It then analyses how multicultural aims may or may not have been articulated in the assessment of performance and productivity in Brazilian higher education policies, as gleaned from the National Plan for Education (Presidency of Republic, 2014), and recent debates around curriculum reform. It discusses the extent to which higher education policies in Brazil have tried to tackle the twin objectives of enhancing performance while also valuing cultural diversity and inclusion in their quality control strategies. The study may have global implications; as international mobility increases societies around the globe should be prepared to value both performance and diversity in their assessment exercises and curricular policies.

Keywords: Brazil, HE policy, evaluation, multicultural education, National Plan for Education

Introduction

The present paper aims to provide a contextual overview of public assessment and curricular policies influencing higher education in Brazil (HE), and particularly those outlined in the National Plan of Education, 2014-2024 (Presidency of Republic, 2014). Through this national case study the paper will discuss the extent to which public assessment policies of HE in Brazil have tried to tackle the twin objectives of enhancing performance and valuing cultural diversity and inclusion. It closes with a discussion of possible ways forward for the assessment of higher education institutions (HEIs) that better reflect the contemporary multicultural Brazil.

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The main argument of this paper is that the valuing of cultural diversity of institutions, faculties, and students in culturally diverse societies such as Brazil has begun to gain momentum as a relevant dimension in the assessment of performance and productivity of higher education. In order to develop the argument, it firstly reviews the supportive literature, before also giving an overview of the institutional structures of higher education in Brazil, and how it develops its quality assessment practices. Finally, it analyses the extent to which multicultural aims have been articulated in the assessment of performance and productivity in Brazilian higher education policies, as gleaned from the National Plan for Education (Presidency of Republic, 2014), and other recent debates around curriculum reform.

Multicultural approach: valuing diversity in curriculum and assessment

Based on a multicultural theoretical framework (Banks, 2004; Canen, 2009, 2012a, b; Ivenicki, 2015; Ivenicki & Xavier, 2015; Ng. & Bloemroad, 2015; Warren & Canen, 2012), I argue that considering education policies from a multicultural perspective could contribute to a more equity-oriented process of schooling, inasmuch as it offers possible ways towards promoting the inclusion of marginalised groups, in addition to the education of new generations that challenge stereotypes and discrimination.

I also contend that a *critical, postcolonial, multicultural perspective* may have a positive impact in shaping new outlooks and avenues in order to combat prejudices and transform schools into more inclusive, plural, and equity-oriented sites. Such a perspective should arguably highlight the provisional and fluid nature of identity construction, and unsettle hegemonic discourses that ideologically construct the very concept of otherness (Banks, 2004; Hall, 2003; Moland, 2015; Warren & Canen, 2012), thereby imbuing the curriculum with an orientation towards equity and social justice. At this point, it is important to define the main concepts used in the present paper, namely assessment, curriculum (and its plural curricula), in a multicultural approach.

Curriculum is understood here as incorporating not only the disciplines and syllabuses, but also the factors that contribute to the educational environment, such as those that are learned but not directly taught. Ladson-Billings (2016) illustrates this so-called hidden curriculum with the example of the message of the school being a dangerous place when they submit students to an x-ray search every time they come to school, particularly evident in some more impoverished areas. Using a multicultural approach, King (2015) refers to curriculum violence as the way in which school and higher education curricula may silence contributions from minority groups, erasing and hindering their belonging and racial/cultural dignity. Therefore, a multicultural, post-colonial curriculum would problematise colonial relationships and provide spaces for the valuing of plural cultural identities.

Gay (2012) suggests there are five mandatory components of a curriculum, namely: rationale, goals and objectives, content, learning activities and experiences, and evaluation. Rationale is the justification of the importance of the body of knowledge; goals and objectives are expected changes in

students' behaviours as a result of learning; content is the information that is essential for achieving the goals and objectives; learning activities and experiences are opportunities provided for students to engage with curriculum content; and evaluation is the determination of the degree to which students have achieved the intended goals and objectives, and the overall quality of the entire curriculum. Using a multicultural approach, Gay (2012) illustrates how each of those components could play a significant role in valuing cultural diversity and combatting stereotypes.

Assessment refers to the process of collecting information for the purpose of making decisions about individuals and educational institutions. Using a multicultural approach, Ysseldyke and Nelson (2012) call for attention to the increased diversity of students and the need to consider that the primary purposes of assessment should be to enhance students' competence and build the capacity of systems to meet their diverse needs. Therefore, it is a broad process of collecting data, not restricted to testing.

As I claim in the present paper, in culturally diverse societies such as Brazil the valuing of cultural diversity of institutions, faculties, and students has begun to gain momentum as a relevant dimension in the assessment of performance and productivity of higher education. Such an argument is supported by existing literature, such as in the study developed by Gay (2012), who shows how present and future ethnic, racial, social-class, and linguistic demographics of students and societies impinge on educational institutions. Gay (2012) posits that valuing cultural diversity in curricula and in the assessment of contents and competencies developed by students may have the potential to play a significant role in correcting the persistent disparities in the achievement of culturally diverse students, and the inequities pervasive in society at large.

Likewise, empirical data, such as that presented in recent research carried out by Fahle and Reardon (2018), clearly show the relevance of considering multicultural identity markers in assessment. The study showed that educational quality may be correlated with local socioeconomic and racial composition, suggesting that the effects of exposure to a differential, culturally sensitive curriculum might mitigate those unequal effects over time. The study highlights the need for assessment to refrain from labelling educational institutions and students as failures and take diversity on board in order to understand its effects on assessment results, and thus mitigate educational inequality.

A study by Bal and Trainor (2015) suggests that assessment and quantitative educational research should allow for drawing conclusions that avoid the "reification of broad generalizations of people from historically marginalized groups and deficit-oriented conclusions that fail to expand the possibility for social change" (p. 347). They advocate the "cultural responsiveness of experimental intervention" as a possible way to address the knowledge gap resulting from definitions of rigor operationalized in assessment and research practices, without paying adequate attention to cultural practices embedded in and resulting from those practices.

In the same vein, Reardon et al. (2018) show the relationship between test item format and gender achievement gaps in multiple choice questions in large scale assessment tests. They point out the fact that we often think of assessment tests as universal, while the evidence from their study suggested that, as opposed to females, males performed poorly in constructed-response items relative to their performance on multiple-choice items, regardless of the content of the questions. This reinforces the need to understand assessment in a multicultural perspective by drawing attention to plural identities' impact on results.

Thus, quality evaluation of educational systems and students may be enhanced by multicultural sensitivities, adding rather than detracting from the ability to make precise judgements of learning and competence, and therefore contributing to informed decision-making aiming to improve quality and educational performance. The fact that such concerns have begun to receive more emphasis in educational research and literature may promote new paradigms geared towards balancing instruments that assess more universalized aspects in addition to other more diverse, singular instruments and indicators that account for the cultural diversity of students, educational institutions, schools, and systems. In fact, when considering assessment policies, it is important to note the extent to which their practices and meanings conform to some common, homogenized approaches that may fail to account for institutional climate and cultural diversity if not accompanied by other assessment instruments that value plural educational institutions' and students' identities (Canen, 2011). On the other hand, it seems important to avoid a relativistic approach that might make assessment policies and strategies dependent solely on the diversity of educational institutions, without the necessary broader approach towards goals that are valid indicators of quality education in a globalized world. The extent to which this balance has been achieved in evaluation policies of higher education in Brazil, as conceived in the Brazilian National Plan for Education (Presidency of Republic, 2014), will be discussed in the following section.

Assessment of HEIs in Brazil: the National Plan for Education

As argued elsewhere (Canen, 2011), the institutional structure of higher education in Brazil consists of public HEIs which are government supported at the federal, state and city levels, and private alternatives include non-profit religious, philanthropic and communitarian institutions, and for-profit institutions. Also, HEIs in Brazil can be classified as: universities, university centers, and integrated higher education schools. It should be noted that universities—particularly government supported and Catholic non-profits—have been associated with the role of knowledge production through a strong orientation towards research. On the other hand, cultural diversity and a commitment to social justice are also important functions in these institutions, recognized for a strong social commitment evident in initiatives geared towards linking their activities to societal needs, and associating citizenship commitment with quality education.

It should be noted that Brazil is a large and culturally diverse country, the fifth most populous country in the world and the biggest in South America, with a population of around 220 million people. It is comprised of 26 states (and one federal district, Brasilia), and each is divided into several districts or municipalities. Therefore, the public educational system is supported by three levels of governance: federal, comprising technical and teacher training schools generally linked to HEIs; state, comprising secondary education; and municipal, responsible for early years and primary education. In terms of timeline, primary education in Brazil takes 9 years, secondary education 3 years, and higher education varies between undergraduate courses (ranging from 4-7 years, depending on the profession), and short technological courses (ranging from 2-3 academic years).

Quality assessment in higher education has been the subject of international debate around different conceptions of appropriate processes. Recently, Ingvarson and Rowley (2017) focus on quality assurance in terms of three main factors: recruitment and selection, in order to assure the quality of entrants to higher education; accreditation policies and agencies, in order to monitor and assure the quality of HEIs and their programs; and policies and agencies governing full entry to professions, including certification, licensing and registration in different countries. The study compared countries from different continents, showing they differed substantially in the strength of their quality assurance arrangements designed to ensure the quality of graduates of HEIs, focusing particularly on teacher education courses. However, the authors contend that policies focused on universal indicators to measure those areas were unlikely to be effective unless accompanied by policies that ensured teachers' salaries and adequate working conditions, among other local and cultural factors.

In Brazil, as argued by Scorsoline (2015), quality control of higher education is the responsibility of the state, which elaborates quality standards deemed necessary for HEIs within the framework of a national system of assessment of higher education called SINAES. Quality assessment of HEIs in Brazil has been regulated by the state since the 1990s. Assessment of quality and its definition are issued by the federal government through laws that are approved by the National congress and sanctioned by the President. It has three integrated approaches to quality assurance, namely: institutional evaluation (self-evaluation); evaluation of undergraduate courses, in order to identify faculty's qualifications, infrastructure and pedagogical organization; and evaluation of students through the application of the ENADE, the national exam of students' performance at the point of graduation, and the ENEM, the national exam of secondary school students' performance at the point of entry to higher education. Evaluations are based on five axes: planning and institutional evaluation; institutional development through analysis of the institutional development plan; academic policies for teaching, research, extension to societal needs, and communication with society and students; administration policies; and infrastructure.

In terms of global comparisons of quality of higher education, the 2017 rankings show that Brazil has a state university that is 121st in the world. Brazil is the leader among Latin American countries

with 43 universities at the top, mostly federal and state supported, with private Catholic institutions close behind. A more international perspective has been identified as a potential means to enhance institutional quality, alongside more multicultural understanding that could arguably foster cultural diversity both at national and international levels.

Following the democratization process in the end of the 1980s, the Brazilian constitution and the Brazilian Law for National Education have stressed the importance of assessing educational systems in order to promote efficient and yet democratic and equitable education for Brazilian students. The dual perspective mentioned before is therefore associated with quality in higher education in Brazil, both in a productivity oriented approach that evaluates institutions in terms of their competence in preparing future professionals for the job market, and a democratic multicultural view that also aims to gauge the extent to which professionals are being prepared to make an impact as conscientious citizens in a multicultural and unequal society.

The National Plan for Education (Presidency of Republic, 2014) is an instrument that delineates goals and strategies for Brazilian education over the ten-year period from 2014-2024, and seems to reinforce this argument. In fact, concerning the assessment of higher education, it should be observed that the National Plan for Education (Presidency of Republic, 2014) is underscored by a general perspective that illustrates both of the aforementioned approaches. For example, its main principles are about “improving the quality of education” (article 2, item IV, p. 1), as well as “promoting the principles of respect to human rights, to human diversity(...)” (article 2, item X, p.1) and “to challenge educational inequalities, with the emphasis on the promotion of citizenship and in the elimination of all sorts of discrimination” (Article 2, item II, p.1). Such general statements may be pointing to the balance between an equity- and quality-oriented approach to the assessment of higher education, as argued earlier in this paper.

On the other hand, this policy instrument also shows elements of a homogenized numerical approach to some of its aims for higher education assessment. They point, for example, to the need to increase enrolment ratio to 50% of entrance (goal 12), to increase master’s and doctoral candidates at the higher education level to 75%, and to develop teacher education so that all of the teachers should hold a tertiary qualification (goal 15) and 50% a postgraduate degree (goal 16). Goal 12 also stresses the need to reinforce the national system of evaluation that has been guiding assessment of higher education in Brazil in the last years, including a national exam for entrance, as opposed to individual HEIs having their own systems.

In terms of quality assessment of the educational system, in addition to assessment of HEIs, the incorporation of multicultural sensitivity into quality assessment of primary and secondary schooling has also begun to make inroads, albeit in a limited capacity. One of the assessment instruments for quality control of primary and secondary education is the *Prova Brasil*, considered as a diagnostic assessment instrument developed by the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research, Anísio Teixeira (*Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira* [Inep/MEC]),

with the goal of assessing the quality of education as offered by the Brazilian educational system. It is part of a package by which the government constructs an assessment index that provides a “final grade” for each school in every assessment period—namely every two years—called the Index of the Development of Basic Education (*Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica* [IDEB]). That index was created in 2007 in order to measure the overall quality of each school in the Brazilian system, so as to enable municipal and state systems to create and attain meaningful goals in order to improve their performance. However, in order to account for social, cultural, and economic diversity into quality assessment, socioeconomic questionnaires have also been applied in which pupils provide contextual information that could be associated with their performance. Teachers and school administrators also respond to the questionnaires to enable the assessment to detect staff diversity, particularly concerning demographic data, professional profiles, and working conditions, as described by authors Ingvarson and Rowley (2017).

Concerning secondary education, the government has implemented the National Exam of Secondary Education (*Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* [ENEM]), another large-scale exam which has been used by universities in order to select candidates for their courses. In fact, the government has been encouraging HEIs to adopt the ENEM as their only criteria for HE access, though this remains at their discretion since legislation guarantees HE autonomy in determining their access policies. It should be pointed out that one of the biggest and most important universities in Brazil—the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro—has adopted the results of the ENEM as its sole entrance exam since the 2012 admission process, instead of administering its own entry exams.

Again, multicultural sensitivity seems to be inherent within government discourses concerning assessment, inasmuch as federal universities in Brazil are deemed to be contributing to equality of educational opportunities to access to HE by adopting the ENEM. This is due to the fact that a single entrance exam for all the institutions in Brazil that opted to incorporate it (as opposed to the varied exams each HE used to decide which students were deemed fit to be admitted to their courses) means that students can list their preferred HEIs and, depending on their results in the exam, effectively be admitted to an HEI appropriate for their ability and whose vacancies have not been filled, even outside their own municipalities or states.

Concerning the emergence of multicultural perspectives in the quality assessment as evident in these policies, particularly in the case of HEIs in Brazil, it is interesting to observe that they allow for the diversity of institutions to be taken into account by offering the chance for self-evaluation, as well as adopting a value-added approach, thereby reinforcing the importance of HEIs’ differentiated impacts on quality performance. It is interesting to note that discussions are ongoing whether to formalize the ENEM as the first evaluation instrument for students beginning their HE courses.

However, on the other hand, it should be noted that the ENEM and the ENADE, as well as the protocol used by the evaluation committees, and the self-evaluation instrument itself are homogenized instruments geared towards assessing HEIs, and are set to be employed for the foreseeable future, as

indicated in the goals of the National Plan for Education (Presidency of Republic, 2014), suggesting a homogenized approach to quality control, potentially to the detriment of valuing diversity. On the other hand, such a homogenized approach is balanced by measures that do highlight the need for valuing cultural diversity and inclusion. For instance, whereas homogenized exams are to be applied to students, both in the ENEM and ENADE, they are, on the other hand, accompanied by socio-economic questionnaires that intend to address diversity and its impacts on outcomes, indicative of an attempt to balance universalized views with more culturally diverse perspectives in assessment.

Also, the National Plan for Education (Presidency of Republic, 2014) allows for progress towards the democratization of access to HEIs to continue. Some of the programs included in this plan include: the Programme University for All (*Programa Universidade para Todos* [PROUNI]), which aims to place academically qualified low-income students in private HEIs after they have proved their ability in the ENEM, with financial support through scholarships and tax exemptions for institutions in return for accepting scholarship students; and affirmative action programmes, that provide quotas for students who attend public secondary schools and are members of demographic groups that have lower levels of education and income, such as black and indigenous communities. Such actions are highly informed by multicultural, inclusive perspectives.

Diversity and flexibility are also highlighted in such Brazilian policies, inasmuch as states and municipalities are free to develop their own curricular designs and teacher training programs in order to meet the required standards. However, on the other hand, again a homogenized approach is apparent in assessment, inasmuch as curricula for schools and HEIs should follow national curricular guidelines. Thus, despite ostensibly making room for diversity and autonomy of choice, those curricular guidelines impose themselves because the aforementioned evaluation instruments, such as students' ENADE, as well as the ENEM and the *Prova Brasil*, should build on the mentioned curricular guidelines. In this process, assessment instruments and the rewards associated with their results may end up making homogenization a stronger message than would be expected in a multiculturally-oriented assessment perspective. This would be evident if the standards-based large scale assessment is the most valued means to evaluate HEIs and schools.

Quality control and multicultural sensitivities in curriculum and assessment have fueled further debates and discord among the academic community in Brazil. More recently, the issuing of a national curricular document, the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC) [the National Common Curricular Base] (Ministry of Education, 2017), which aimed to outline objectives, strategies, and content to be followed by schools in Brazil, has sparked tension between homogenized and culturally sensitive curriculum guidelines. Even though its elaboration was already a point of contention in 2015, in 2017 its final draft raised further criticism from the academic community. It is noteworthy that the Brazilian National Association for Research (ANPEd), in its newsletter of December 5th 2017, issued a bid to the National Council of Education asking them to suspend the voting on the BNCC,

claiming that even though there had been a consultation period, the contributions of the academic community were allegedly not taken into account in the final version of that document.

However, the voting took place at the end of December and the BNCC was approved by counsellors, and it was homologated by the President of the Republic on December 20th, 2017, becoming a compulsory document that affects curricula in all schools in Brazil. At the time of its homologation, the Minister of Education, Mendonça Filho, employed multicultural terminology to say that the BNCC was a groundbreaking curricular document that should “*guarantee that Brazil will be among the main nations of the world [in educational terms], whilst it also ensures that the son of a poor family and that of a middle class one should have the same [educational] treatment*” (Pains et al., 2017, p. 30).

However, as opposed to that apparently multiculturally sensitive statement, the ANPEd manifesto argues that:

The creation of the BNCC does not contemplate the dimensions of the diversity in the Brazilian education. Therefore, there is a serious risk of ruining all the educational and environmental policy in our country (...). The associates of the ANPEd confirm their position contrary to the BNCC, due both to its methodology of elaboration and to the evident implications in the processes of evaluation of learning; the homogenization of curriculum and teacher education; and the menace it represents to schools autonomy (ANPEd motion 12, ANPEd, 2017, p.1).

The above excerpts illustrate how policy initiatives can be resisted by educational actors on the basis that they do not address the complexities of schools and HEIs, e.g., when such policies are perceived by educational actors as being oblivious to institutional constraints such as poor infrastructure, and other challenges and burdens affecting faculty and students’ lives, morale, and diversity. On the other hand, Carnoy et al. (2017) make the point that within the federal system in Brazil, it is always important to discuss how differences in performance may reflect different organizational arrangements between states and municipalities.

Based on that scenario, measures should arguably be devised in order to boost faculty competencies in dealing with cultural differences, enhance their perceived value, and contribute by allocating more resources to school and HEIs’ infrastructure, in a multiculturally embedded perspective. As claimed by authors such as Shahjahan et al. (2017), some measures could be taken in order to make assessment more culturally sensitive, such as changing the unit of analysis or the relative weight of some input measures to control variables, and by proposing strategies of holding rankings agencies to account. They illustrate their argument with cases of counter-hegemonic ranking systems, so as to consider the positionality of visible minorities and go beyond “ranking practices that are perceived to matter only for University reputation” (p.568). In that sense, rather than approaching assessment in a dualistic, dichotomous approach, a multicultural perspective could

be more strongly incorporated into quality assessment of HEIs, viewing diversity as an asset rather than a liability.

Conclusions

The present paper discussed how multicultural sensitivities have grown in stature in the quality assessment literature, as well as in recent educational policies in Brazil, particularly drawing on the National Plan for Education (Presidency of Republic, 2014) and some discussions concerning the issuing of national curricular guidelines in the form of the BNCC (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The extent to which quality control and respect for diversity can be balanced in curricular and assessment policies has been the key factor of debates in this area. On the one hand, democratization and equity of access and the valuing of diversity seem to underlie the discourses of educational policies, including those focusing on assessment, based on the assumption that standards-based assessment will increase quality teaching for all, and that the ENEM, for instance, may be the basis for broader and more equity oriented access to universities for students from cultural and social diverse backgrounds. However, on the other hand, the emphasis on homogenized standards-based approaches may constrain such goals if they are not followed by other assessment criteria and indeed by other measures that take on board the plurality inherent to Brazilian schools and HEIs.

From the above, there seems to be an urgent need to complement assessment in a standards-based approach with another alternative multicultural assessment model that would take on board the challenges of working simultaneously with objective and subjective assessment criteria, by understanding schools and HEIs as multicultural sites, and assessment as a multilayered, complex process in which quality control and the valuing of diversity should go hand in hand.

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