

## New Audiences and New Educational Stratifications in Brazilian Higher Education in the 21st Century\*

Caregnato, C.E.<sup>†</sup>

Raizer, L.<sup>†</sup>

Grisa, G.<sup>‡</sup>

Miorando, B.S.<sup>†</sup>

<sup>†</sup>Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

<sup>‡</sup>Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

### Abstract

This article addresses the contradictions associated with the access of new audiences to higher education in Brazil in the last decade, aiming to describe and characterize the expansion of the system. Advances and limitations can be identified, as there are democratization movements and changes in patterns of persistent inequality. The discussion is based on studies about educational stratification, drawing on a Bourdieusian framework, and uses secondary statistical data on higher education and other Brazilian social indicators, collected by official agencies. The analysis indicates the increase in access to higher education in terms of income and ethnic group, allowing for a broader access to academic cultural capital and labour opportunities. However, it reinforces the argument that inequalities associated with educational stratification still remain in Brazil. The inclusion of these new audiences in Brazilian higher education is marked by categories of differentiation, such as the nature of institutions and funding of higher education, types of degree, teaching modality and shift. With that, despite the advances towards massification and retreat on vertical stratification, the forms of horizontal stratification in Brazilian higher education are increasing.

**Keywords:** Higher education; educational stratification; new audiences; Brazil.

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## 1. Introduction

In the Brazil of the 21st century, the enrolment in higher education increased from 2,695,927, in 2000, to 8,027,297, in 2015, which corresponds to a growth of 197.8%. With them, the possibilities of entry of new population strata at this level of education have expanded. In fact, the National Education Plan (PNE) for the period 2014-2024, in establishing a vision of future for the Brazilian educational policy, designs the expansion of higher education. Among its 20 goals, number 12 is “raising the gross rate of enrolment in higher education to 50% and the net rate to 33% of the population from 18 to 24 years, assuring the quality of supply and expansion for at least 40% of new enrolments in the public sector” (Brasil, 2014, Anexo, Meta 12). When PNE was designed, the net enrolment rate in higher education – young people between 18 and 24 years old enrolled – was 17.7% in Brazil.

Thus, achieving such a goal would mean carrying out the transformation proposed by Trow (2007) as a transition from an elite higher education to mass higher education, with universalizing tendencies. According to Trow’s formulation, the quantitative change of audiences incorporated into the system leads also to a qualitative change in its functioning and, therefore, in its nature. In other words, the process of massification of higher education would also mean a higher distribution of opportunities in society. However, in Brazil, some movements and accommodations seem to be taking place in order to maintain higher education’s elitist character. The controversial spending cap proposed by Temer’s administration – and approved in 2016 by Brazil’s Congress, which will limit public spending (including education) to inflation for the next 20 years, constitutes the best example in that direction.

PNE’s goals for higher education aimed to change a situation of difficult access and permanence for a large part of the Brazilian population. The data brought in this article show the expansion as an on-going movement, in which progress has been achieved amidst contradictions. This becomes clearer when we consider sociological studies on the topic of educational stratification in Brazil (Brito, 2014; Caseiro, 2016; de Melo, et al., 2016; Marteleto, Marschner, Carvalhaes, 2016; Mont’alvão, 2016; Silva, 2003). We will present here elements of the Brazilian higher education system that allow one to see the participation of new audiences, aiming to discuss limits and perspectives on overcoming inequalities.

Seeking a synthesis between literature and empirical analysis of reality, the methodology of our study was the analysis of secondary data about the Brazilian higher education system, as well as of social indicators of the population and conditions of employment and income in the country. The first part discusses theoretical elements consolidated in academic literature, seeking to interpret the relation between educational stratification and capitals that support positions in the academic environment. The second part of the text presents structural elements of the Brazilian higher education system. In the third part, we present and analyse data from official databases, as is the case of the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (Inep) – linked to the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) – and the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). Such data allow us to interpret the presence of new audiences in higher education, as well as to verify trends of their participation in the system. The fourth part of the text connects the data analysis with theoretical references to interpret the transformations of the system in the 21st century. We emphasize that the presence of new audiences takes place in a context of inequality, producing new stratifications, without denying the progress that occurred with their inclusion in the Brazilian higher education system (Caregnato & Raizer, 2017).

## 1.1 Stratification, capital and habitus in higher education

The topic of educational stratification relates to the interaction between social origin and educational levels achieved by individuals. Based on this relationship, it is possible to verify tendencies to social mobility of some population segments. The classical interpretations on the subject differ from each other. The theory of modernization stresses the perspective that the school system is a mechanism for effective mobility (Parsons, 1974), education being a great means for overcoming social inequalities. On the other hand, the theory of cultural reproduction emphasizes the intergenerational trend to maintain levels inherited in the family environment. These levels would only be overcome based on a lot of individual effort or with cultural goodwill (Bourdieu, 1983, 2007).

The condition of permanence in the same educational levels in relation to previous generations indicates stability in the system and little or no mobility (Bourdieu, 2010a; Silva, 2003). In contrast, educational systems are more open or democratic the more their results allow individuals to overcome social limitations determined by a family origin of low formal education. The data in this article seem to reinforce the perspective of reproduction. If new population segments reach higher school results, this is not necessarily translated into a general equalization of educational and social opportunities.

Young people from population segments whose previous generations did not have access to higher education comprise the new audiences on Brazilian higher education. The level of education of parents is usually presented along with other important variables to characterize these audiences. One of them is low income, which hinders the access to higher education in a country where the offer is mainly private and paid. Another is the quantum of cultural capital accumulated in the families of origin, often limited before the mastery of codes and references required to ensure success in this stage of schooling. There are also elements of heterogeneity that characterize them as “new” audiences, because they are plural. Plurality appears in the different income levels, ethnic group, region of origin, as well as in the different age groups from that of reference, between 18 and 24 years.

All these markers of diversity point also to different constellations of habitus. Due to the habitus' capacity of being transferred across multiple contexts, individuals use the same practical frameworks to answer to new situations (Bourdieu, 2007; Wacquant, 2011). An individual's habitus is usually composed by their interaction with the other members of the social group in which they are inserted. This social group has a variable quantum of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals, which entails different opportunities. In the convergence of cultural and social capitals, Kleanthous (2014), notes the influence of informational capital in the families' strategies for promoting a successful student transition to higher education.

In the Brazilian current context, as a great educational expansion is succeeded by an economic retraction, it is possible to notice a trend characterized by Bourdieu (1978) in the relation between the educational system and the broader social system. The growth of the number of diploma holders is quicker than the growth of the number of positions to which these diplomas led in the past. The holders of devalued diplomas are not inclined to recognize such devaluation, which affects their social identity.

Using the terminology of Charles and Bradley (2002), we can consider that the establishment of new audiences in education stresses the situation of vertical educational stratification existing in Brazil. It changes the levels of inequality regarding the different levels of education obtained by population segments. In this sense, there is a reduction of inequality in terms of access to higher education. However, the horizontal stratification dimension, related to the different types and/or quality of education obtained at this level, remains an open issue, still to be addressed by public policy. Indeed, on the relation between social and educational stratification in Brazil, there are classical (Silva, 2003) and contemporary studies (Arretche,

2015; Brito, 2014) that, by probabilistic statistics, collaborate to present the existing differences and show the expansion of the system in certain periods, in parallel with the maintenance of inequalities in various levels of schooling. Brazilians from undeprieviled strata invest in more accessible, or more affordable, devalued higher education titles and end up supporting a system that devalues their own investments. This happens as they understand that even a title that is subject to devaluation will allow for better life conditions than no title (Felicetti, Morosini, Somers, 2013). This is linked to the habitus, producing effects that are not exactly the intended ones. Therefore, the possible gains of the new audiences within the system are limited.

## 1.2 Characterization of higher education in Brazil

The structure of higher education in Brazil is set by the 1988 Federal Constitution and by the National Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB), issued in 1996. The definition of gratuity of education in public higher education institutions (HEIs) is defined in the Federal Constitution (Brasil, 1988, Art. 206).

In addition, the system presents a diversification of institutional types. The normative structure divides HEIs in universities, university centers and colleges, with varying degrees of autonomy and academic prestige. There is still another dimension of diversification that is composed by the federal institutes of education, science and technology that are legally equivalent to technological universities and play a role similar to institutes of technology in other countries. The distribution of enrolments in relation to the institutional type shows important differences. Universities, even constituting the minority in all institutions of higher education – 8.2% or 195 universities – concentrate 53.2% of national enrolment. Colleges constitute 83.8% of all institutions and hold only 28% of enrolment. University centers represent a statistical minority in number of institutions (6.3%), but hold 16.9% of enrolment in the country. The remainder of enrolments, corresponding to 1.8% of the total, occur in the federal institutes of education, science and technology (Inep, 2016).

Higher education in Brazil provides two levels of training: undergraduate and postgraduate. In this article, we will focus the analysis on the undergraduate level. At this level of education, three types of degrees are offered: bachelors, scientific or humanistic training, for professional, academic, or cultural activity; licentiates, training to act as a teacher in primary and secondary education; and the technologists, specialized training in technological areas, to act in specific professional areas. The type of program with the higher number of enrolments in the country is the one leading to a bachelors degree (69%), followed by licentiates (18.4%), and technologists (12.6%). The courses are typified in two modes of supply: presential and distance learning, the latter with 17.4% of enrolment (Inep, 2016).

Another essential element of differentiation between the HEIs is their administrative category: maintained by the government or by private entities. Public HEIs can be maintained by federal, state, and municipal authorities, and federal and some state universities have the highest prestige as research institutions. In a total of 2,364 HEIs in activity, 87.5% of them are private and 12.5% are public. Regarding enrolment in higher education, 75.7% are carried out in the private sector and 24.3% in the public sector. Less prestigious HEIs are in the private sector, which is responsible for 94% of university centers and 93% of colleges. Meanwhile, universities are mostly on the public network (54.9%). It is also in the private sector that distance education enrolment is concentrated, with 90.8% of the total.

Regarding the study shift, most enrolments of Brazilian higher education occur in evening courses. Private HEIs, which offer the greatest number of vacancies in the country, have 72% of their enrolment in evening courses, in contrast with public HEI, which offer 36.5% of their vacancies at evening. In the whole system, the percentage of evening and day vacancies

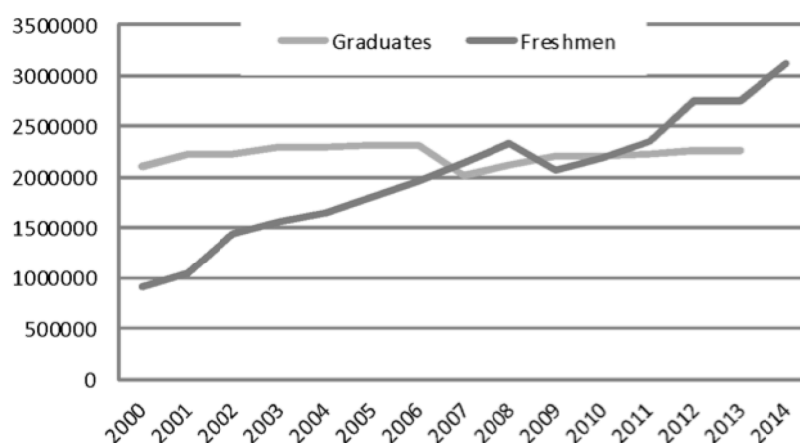
totals 62.1% and 37.9%, respectively (Inep, 2016).

In terms of the social effects of tertiary-level training, in Brazilian society, holding a higher education diploma may carry very high symbolic and economic values, which can be seen in different ways. Workers with tertiary level earned, for example, in average, monthly wages more than twice as high as workers who had only completed the upper secondary level, with values 137% higher (Brasil, 2017).

### 1.3 Expansion of access to the system and the new audiences of higher education

The expansion of access to higher education appears in Figure 1, below. It shows the number of students graduating from high school and the number of freshmen in higher education. If all students graduating from high school joined higher education in the next year of studies, the lines would appear overlapped. However, since the beginning of this decade, the chart shows a far greater incidence of freshmen in higher education. This is because there are other audiences, in addition to students graduating from high school, entering higher education. It is the case of people already graduated that come back to study, as well as the case of those who return to study after a period of interruption. Figure 1 shows a significant increase of freshmen in higher education between 2000 and 2014.

Recently in Brazil, a major innovation in the selection process for entry into higher education was implemented by making use of the National High School Exam (Enem), established in 1998. Historically, the entry in public HEIs has occurred by a selection process known as vestibular, a very competitive exam, especially among the courses with higher social status.



*Figure 1: Numbers of graduates from high school in the previous year and freshmen in higher education from 2000 to 2014. (Source: Adapted by the authors from Inep, Higher Education Census and School Census (2016))*

Since 2010, the Unified Selection System (Sisu), created and managed by the Brazilian Ministry of Education, is a selective process to public HEIs that uses, exclusively, the score obtained by the candidate in Enem. Unlike vestibular, candidates take the test and only afterward, according to their performance, choose the institution and course in which they will try to enroll. This innovation has stimulated student movement within the country. Consequently, it requires greater support for student housing and student assistance policies, especially for being combined with a quota system that allows part of the vacancies for students from low-income families.

This income dimension permeates a process by which, since the mid-1990s, a set of public policies led to the expansion of higher education in Brazil, both in the private and public network (Caseiro, 2016). In a society with high levels of inequality, as is the Brazilian one, the possibilities of private funding by young people and their families are quite limited. In 2015, the average per capita monthly income of Brazilians was BRL 1,113.00 (IBGE, 2016), about USD 321.17. At the same time, Hoper (2014) identifies the average monthly cost of studying at a private HEI as BRL 645.00, or about USD 186.12 in 2014.

In such a scenario, the expansion in access to higher education occurred based on various state policies that promoted the public funding of higher education offered by the private sector. Among them, the Student Financing Fund (Fies) and the University for All Program (Prouni) stand out.

Fies was established in 1999, replacing other less accessible modalities of student loan. It provides public funding to private HEIs students, with subsidized interest rates through contracted financial institutions. Students can pay most of their debts after obtaining their degrees. Fies was heavily expanded between 2004 and 2015. The total number of benefited students grew from 318,7 thousand to 2,18 million in the period, and the annual disbursements of the program rose from BRL 629 million to BRL 16.58 billion (Fundo de Financiamento Estudantil, 2016).

Prouni, officially established in 2005, offers full scholarships for students with per capita household income of up to 1.5 minimum wage, or partial scholarships for per capita household income of up to 3 minimum wages. The Brazilian minimum wage was BRL 788.00 in 2015, about USD 227.38. These scholarships are linked to vacancies offered in private HEIs through tax breaks by the State, and available to people with disabilities, and public school teachers enrolled in teacher training courses. Prouni also establishes quotas for black, mixed, and indigenous people in the allocation of scholarships. The percentage of scholarships reserved must be proportional to the population size of these ethnical groups in the federative unit of the HEI. In 2015, students have been granted 483,336 thousand enrolments in the private sector with Prouni scholarships. In 2015, 44% of enrolment in the private higher education network had some sort of financial support or scholarship (Inep, 2016).

In the public sector, investments in higher education were directed both at access and permanence. Aiming to expand the number of students, the Program for Supporting Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (Reuni) was implemented in 2007. During this period, enrolments in undergraduate courses in federal HEI increased 69.6%, which means a rate at least twice as high as other networks (Caseiro, 2016). Since 2003, 18 new federal universities have been implemented (many of them with a multi-campus structure), as well as new campuses of already existing universities, aiming to interiorize the offer of public higher education, so far concentrated in the big cities. In another line of action, the National Student Assistance Plan (Pnaes), created in 2008, allocated public funds to federal HEIs for providing support to low-income students, investing in academic services of housing, meals, and transportation, among others.

The entry of new audiences in federal HEIs was also stimulated by Law 12,711 of 2012, which establishes affirmative actions in these institutions, defining that they must reserve 50% of their vacancies for students who have attended high school fully in public schools. The law also stipulates that half of vacancy reservation will be for students with per capita household income equal to or less than 1.5 minimum wage, equivalent to the value of about USD 341.07 in 2015.

Figure 2, below, shows the increase in access according to the segments of population fifths by income and shows an expansion in the participation of the lower income population.

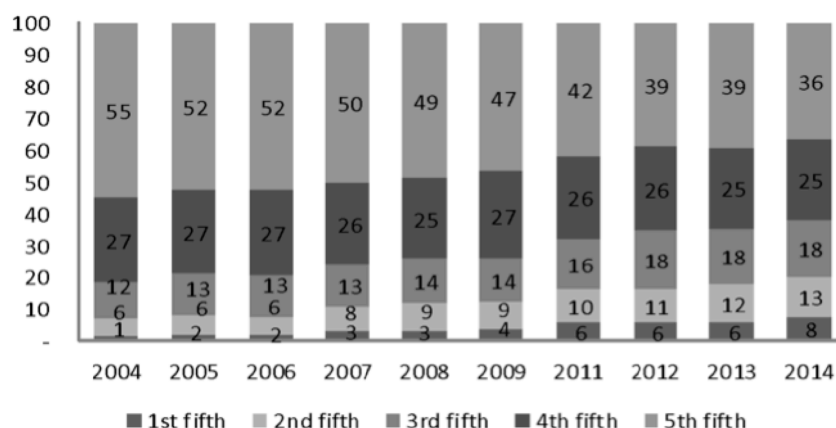


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of students in the public higher education network, by fifths of per capita monthly household income – Brazil – 2004/2014. (Source: Adapted by the authors from IBGE, National Household Sample Survey 2004/2014. Note: There was no research in 2010.)

The law of affirmative action provides quotas for ethnic groups – black, mixed, and indigenous – in proportional number to the populations in the federative unit in which the program takes place. The Law 12,711 uses the classification employed in the national census, which allows people to identify with one of the five categories of ethnical origin: black [pretos], indigenous [indígenas], mixed [pardos], white [brancos] and yellow [amarelos]. This measure came from organized political demands of social segments identified with the new audiences in higher education, since the early 2000s. Among the federal HEIs, 68% of them adopted some type of affirmative action, when there was still no federal legislation on the topic (Daflon et al., 2013).

Up to 2011, there was no national survey on ethnic groups in Brazil’s academic records. With the data between 2011 and 2014, it is possible to see an expansion especially among black and mixed people, starting from 2.39 to 4.32% and 9.59 to 17.83% of the total enrolment, respectively, as Figure 3 shows.

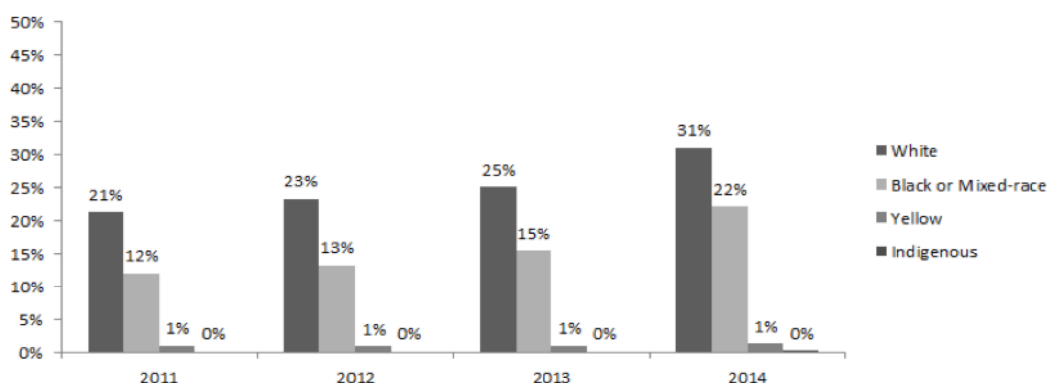
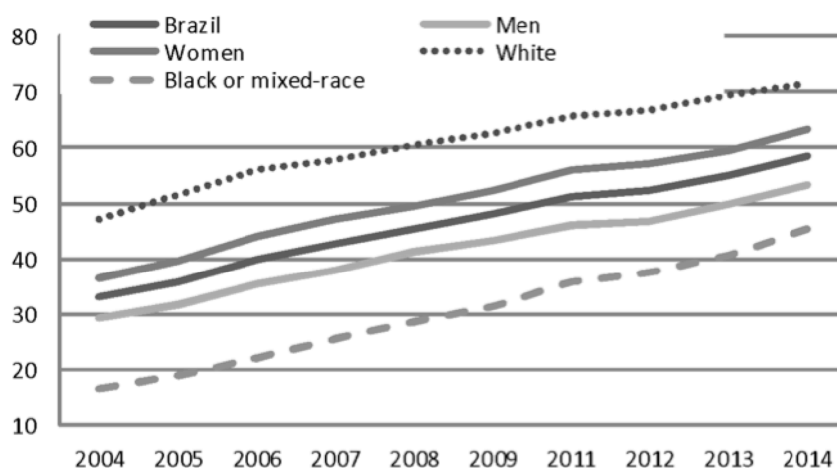


Figure 3: Total enrolment in local and distance undergraduate courses, by ethnic groups. (Source: Adapted by the authors from Inep, Higher Education Census (2016). For the preparation of the figure, we excluded those who had not reported their ethnic group.)

Moreover, Figure 4, below, presents a view of the increase of the population aged between 18 and 24 years in higher education, by sex and ethnic group, including those who are in postgraduate level.



*Figure 4: Proportion of students from 18 to 24 years who attend higher education, by sex or ethnic groups – Brazil – 2004/2014. (Source: Adapted by the authors from IBGE, National Household Sample Survey 2004/2014.)*

Regarding the gender variable in higher education, women are the majority among freshmen (53.9%), enrolled students (55.6%), and graduates (59.9%) (Inep, 2016). Nevertheless, this increased participation in higher education and higher rate of completion has not yet ensured income equality between women and men with higher education. In Brazil, in 2016, the average remuneration of women with higher education corresponds to 66.85% of the average remuneration of men with the same education (BRASIL, 2017).

Stimulating distance education was also a significant factor to enable the increase in the number of students in the higher education system. In 2006, the Open University of Brazil (UAB) was created as a national policy, offering distance courses by agreements with federal institutions. The offer of distance education reached 6.7% of federal HEIs' vacancies in 2015. This policy was intent on interiorizing undergraduate programs and attacking regional inequalities of access to them.

With the achievement of all these public policies between 2004 and 2015, the number of graduates of higher education has grown 80% in the country, going from 466,000 to 837,000 (Inep, 2016). This growth, however, was not produced without contradictions. In the midst of the different strategies for expanding access to free higher education, with significant investment in the expansion of the public network, the growth of the private sector still stands out. Between 2005 and 2015, this sector grew 65.4%, far above the 47.5% of growth registered by the public sector. Recently, however, between 2014 and 2015, both sectors registered a slowdown in the growth of total enrolment. During this period, there was a decrease in the number of freshmen on the public (-2.6%) and private networks (-6.9%) (Inep, 2016).

#### **1.4 Educational stratification and the new audiences of higher education**

The presented data show the expansion of the higher education system and the growth in the presence of new audiences. The system and number of vacancies were expanded, and affirmative policies were implemented. Specifically regarding the possibilities for entry into higher education by Sisu, which is based on Enem, there seems to exist progress towards



regional mobility and the possibility of occupation of vacancies that could remain unoccupied in public institutions with vestibular exam, especially in times of decreased demand. However, the entry and even graduation in higher education does not mean achieving equality of positions (Dubet, 2016) between different social strata in order to establish conditions for participation in society in general.

Despite the existence of affirmative policies, many students do not have access to information about vacancies designed for their profile as a compensatory opportunity for their social condition or ethnic identity, showing that the lack of informational capital impacts in the loss of educational opportunities (Caregnato and Oliven, 2017). As several studies on educational stratification have shown (Silva, 2003; Arretche, 2015; Charles and Bradley, 2002; Gerber and Cheung, 2008), when there is expansion of educational systems, the movement of inequality starts to be expressed in the higher levels of the education system. Thus, how can this displacement of the inequality in this level of education be seen in Brazil? Observing where the offer of vacancies expanded may help answering that question. Arretche (2015) states that the last 50 years were enough to change the degree of elitism of higher education in Brazil, but they did not mean overcoming inequalities related to higher education.

Returning to the ideas of Charles and Bradley (2002), this inequality moves from a vertical to a horizontal dimension. Gerber and Cheung (2008), when consolidating the literature on horizontal stratification – linked to the qualitative elements within higher education –, group its operation in two vectors: one related to institutions attended and another related to personal experiences obtained. The empirical data seem to show the action of these vectors in the dynamics of access of the new audiences to Brazilian higher education in three main categories.

The first category is identified with the institutional question. This stratification vector is represented by the nature of HEI and the funding policy for higher education expansion. Educational policies in Brazil have managed the entry of underprivileged segments in higher education by funding vacancies in the private sector. However, the differences in quality between HEIs have not been attacked with the necessary intensity to curtail the deepening of horizontal stratification. This dynamic has preserved stratification even between those HEIs with same academic organization, expanding institutions that act in a strong market direction. The second category combines the two vectors proposed by Gerber and Cheung (2008) and relates to the types of degrees, as intermediate variables between institution and individual experience. Regarding the distribution of new audiences among university areas, it is possible to assume that a large part are enrolled in program with lower added value in terms of professional status and average income. The growth of higher education in this century has preserved a previous trend of offering most vacancies on programs leading to a licentiate's degree, which enjoy less social prestige and lower return in the labour market. The profession of school teacher is significantly undervalued in the country, with wages up to 39% lower than other professions of the same level of training (Pinho, 2016), and tends to be the choice of segments previously marginalized in higher education (Góes and Duque, 2016).

The third category relates to the vector of the particular academic experiences of individuals and concerns the mode and shift attended by the new audiences. Especially, the segment of working students – a substantial part of the new audiences – tends to seek more distance or evening courses. In these courses, students experience less socialization with academic culture. With that, they acquire smaller volumes of cultural capital than students from presential daytime courses. They also have less opportunities to build and strengthen networks of social capital that favour their insertion in the labour market.

## 1.5 Conclusion

The participation of new audiences in higher education is arguably an indicator of democratization of the system. The progress achieved in this century towards wider participation in higher education is encouraging the goal of massification of this educational level, foreseen in PNE 2014-2024. In the Brazilian case, there are clear public policies of access for expanding the supply in order to consolidate a system of masses, in the terms of Trow (2007). However, vertical stratification remains significant and horizontal stratification maintains features of inequality that are typical of an elite higher education system.

The university student population composition has changed quantitatively and qualitatively. The group of university students incorporating new segments of income and ethnic group, identified as new audiences of higher education.

Nonetheless, when accessing the university environment, these audiences are constrained by patterns of inequality. These inequalities work, notably, in three categories of horizontal stratification that condition the cultural experience and the dynamics of social integration provided by higher education. Obtaining a degree in a low prestige institution, in a course with lower social recognition, and in a mode of instruction or shift less intensive in training means a cultural experience that gives the individual less conditions for social and occupational integration in comparison to the traditional audiences. We understand, therefore, that the way in which the expansion of higher education takes place in Brazil is associated with processes of devaluation of degrees. The required consequence for the expansion and inclusion policies in higher education would be a policy aimed at reducing of asymmetries that hinder the social mobility of students, which so far have not been effectively tackled.

We can still affirm that the main victims of the devaluation of school degrees or titles are the ones that are on the market without these titles, as Bourdieu points out (2010b). This form of segregation is much more significant in a society as unequal as Brazil's. Even as we call attention to horizontal stratification, we recognize that vertical stratification is still the major variable in analyzing social stratification.

Thus, public policies aimed at consolidating mass higher education would need to accompany the integration of graduates in the labour market. The growth in the number of graduates without the generation of qualified job positions leads to individual and collective consequences with the non-use of the accumulated capital. This dynamic perpetuates a rigid system of stratification with few opportunities of social mobility for the new audiences. Thus, the ability that higher education has to produce social innovation tends to be reduced in the country.

We have debated so far the recent expansion of vacancies in higher education and how it beacons the arrival of a new social contingent, representing the first generation of their families or social group to obtain an academic degree. One of the challenges of future research will be examining the impact that this new segment of highly-skilled workers will produce in labour market relations and in the distribution of the spaces of power in society.

This will depend, among other factors, on the possibilities of agency in which the new audiences will frame themselves. In this sense, we believe that the codes acquired in the experience of higher education will play a significant role in the political disputes for distributive policies that are to occur from the micro-level of individuals to the macro-level of state politics. All this is also linked to the possible constellations of agencies that emerge in the meso-level of campus life, where the socialization of the new audiences can take up new meanings and yield new possibilities of political action.

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