In Booming Brazil, the University System Expands, With Mixed Success

By Andrew Downie

São Paulo, Brazil

The biggest higher-education expansion in the history of Brazil has added campuses in dozens of cities and towns throughout this vast nation over the past few years. But for every person celebrating new classrooms in once-ignored regions, there's another lamenting weak execution: a lack of space, a shortage of equipment, or a poorly thought-out curriculum.

The Reuni program, as it's commonly known here, was designed to expand Brazil's elite, free public-university system and put campuses in the poor suburbs and rural, less-developed parts of the country. The project is considered vital in a nation where severe social and economic inequality threaten to hamper the country's rapid economic growth, and high-skilled jobs often go unfilled.
On one level, the program can claim extraordinary achievements. Since 2003 the number of towns and cities with a public-university presence has more than doubled, and the number of seats available to students has risen from 109,000 to 243,000. (About three-quarters of all college students in Brazil attend private institutions, but the public system is considered more elite.)

"This was one of the biggest successes we've ever had, not just in terms of execution but also in terms of size," says Amaro Lins, Brazil's higher-education secretary. "It has democratized higher education and taken it into the interior of Brazil where universities were not present."

Yet Reuni has been, and continues to be, hamstrung by typically Brazilian problems, including a baffling bureaucracy and a glacial pace of construction. Some professors have been forced to conduct classes in local schools or hotels because their promised classrooms failed to materialize. Public transport to remote locations can be slow or inefficient, and there is often a lack of qualified staff and administrators. On some campuses, offices are filled with books because the library isn't big enough.

"The implementation hasn't been as efficient as the concept," says Douglas Cassiano, a chemical-engineering professor who has worked at two of the new universities and monitored Reuni's first few years up close. "There's a disconnect between what they planned
to do and what they have actually done."

The Good With the Bad
Reuni, formally known as the Support Program for the Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities, began during the administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. A charismatic former factory worker, Lula, as he is known, never finished high school and pledged to make life better for Brazil's poor and disadvantaged.

In the years since Reuni started, authorities have spent 10 billion reais ($5-billion at today's exchange rate) on building and equipping four new universities and 145 new branches of existing universities, Mr. Lins says. The number of students enrolled in public institutions has doubled, as has the number of professors.

But although there are now federal universities in Brazil's farthest-flung corners—professors get to one campus in Amazonia by taking a nine-hour boat ride—the conditions and quality of the education they offer is hotly debated.

Some of the new institutions are among the best in Brazil, academics say. Others are among the worst.

Take the Federal University of São Paulo, or Unifesp, which embodies both the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Unifesp has added five campuses in and around São Paulo, a metropolitan area of more than 20 million people.
That has been a boon to Diadema, a hardscrabble city, bolted to the edge of São Paulo, that is home to ironworks, chemical plants, and other heavy industry. Until the Unifesp campus opened here, in 2006, the nearest public university was in São Paulo, requiring an often long and arduous commute. The new campus now enrolls 2,400 students, who can choose from among 12 programs in science and engineering, tailored to the needs of the local community.

"One of the reasons I came here was because this is a region with a lot of industry, and they will need professionals in my area," says Elton Escobar, a third-year student in environmental sciences.

Perhaps most important, 10 percent of the students who pass the entrance exam are from Diadema rather than surrounding areas, up from 1.5 percent when the university opened. That increase suggests that the campus has gained the respect of local families, who consider it a valid alternative to studying in São Paulo.

"Today people here see the university as something close to them," says Virginia Junqueira, the campus's academic director.

By contrast, in Guarulhos, a large industrial suburb of São Paulo, students and professors complain about a half-finished campus with poorly thought-out academic programs. When it opened, in 2007, with undergraduate courses in philosophy, history, social sciences, and pedagogy, the branch campus was run from a building on land donated by the local mayor.
A planned expansion never got off the ground, leaving 3,000 students to cram themselves into a single building and a nearby school.

Marcos Cezar de Freitas, until recently the academic director there, blames Brazil's convoluted construction-bidding process. The company that won the initial bid went bankrupt, wasting two years. The winner of the second bid made a proposal so unrealistic that the process was suspended.

"Students say to me, 'Where is the refectory?'" he complains. "And I say it will take two years, and they say, 'But I am hungry right now.'"

The lack of promised progress has caused discontent among students and instructors. Dissatisfaction is so widespread that some professors have signed a petition asking the rector to halt all building work and abandon the expansion plan.

Critics also say that the community has benefited little from the new campus. The local elementary and secondary schools are so weak that few high-school graduates are able to pass the entrance exam.

"The vast majority of students come from São Paulo because they have access to the best schools," says Henry Burnett, a philosophy professor who has vociferously criticized the current setup. "What they lack here is education, infrastructure, health, public transport."
Critics also complain about the curriculum. The Diadema campus offers programs that teach students the skills needed to work in local industry. The Guarulhos campus instead opted for a curriculum focused more on social sciences, creating, for example, one of the biggest philosophy departments in Brazil. That may make academics like Mr. Burnett happy, but, as he says, the impoverished neighborhoods surrounding the campus see little need for philosophers.

Several of the newer universities have chosen to focus on the liberal arts—still a controversial move in much of Brazil.

Herbert Toledo Martins, a professor at the Federal University of the Recôncavo da Bahia, a new institution in one of Brazil's largest and least developed states, is a critic of degrees without a specific career focus.

"Students do four years, and when they graduate they are not psychologists, not engineers, not physiotherapists. We are fooling people into getting a diploma that is worth nothing in the job market," says Mr. Toledo, who heads the faculty association at the university.

Students say they're aware of the limitations of these new institutions.

"I came here because it's a new university and I thought I'd help
construct the courses. I wanted to make history," says Natalia Menezes, a history major at the Unifesp Guarulhos. "It hasn't worked out perfectly. I thought there would be more resources and that it would be more looked after."

Nevertheless, many are simply happy to be getting a free education at a public university.

Despite the program's many problems, government officials promise further expansion of the system. They say Brazil cannot afford not to act. "We are building four new universities, and we are going to create 47 new campuses," says Mr. Lins, the higher-education secretary. "There is a still a huge demand that we need to satisfy."
The Reuni Program is one more demagogical creation of ex-president Lula and his supporters. All the campuses that were created should be better called “favelas”; they do not have the minimal infrastructure for teaching and research. It was not for other reason that the Federal Government just faced 6 months of strikes organized by the professor and students.

The Brazilian Public Universities have completely autonomy to manage the tax-payer money in the way they want without reporting to anyone. All executive positions (from the Chancellor to the Department Chair) are filled via internal elections (the power union). Even in the best prestigious free-public universities in Brazil, a high percentage of the rooms are not be filled in some areas. In the Brazilian university system (public and private) there is no connection between the need of the market and the type of programs that is offered.

The Lula Government also exchanged the tax-payers money of the private universities for rooms for low income-family students in these institutions (Prouni Program fellowship). The amount of students in these pro-profit universities is many folders higher than the ones in the Reuni Programs. This institution usually has a better infrastructure than the public universities. Nevertheless, the low-income students must work during the day to pay their living expenses and study during the night in these private universities. It is better than nothing, but it is far from the goal to provide good training that would allow their alumni to find job.

To make things even worse, the quality of public elementary and high school is just terrible. The Federal Government should invert this equation and provide free high quality of education from our kids and adolescents. The free university should be provided just by the students from low-income families that have the qualification to attend one BS program. The Government should also invest in the students that do not have these qualifications, but have the intellectual potential to be prepared to pass in the exam for public universities. The Federal Government also should accept to exchange tax-payers money for room just in the universities that can offer a high level of education training.

There is no unemployment in Brazil and the only way to increase productivity if to invest in high quality education. Unfortunately, we are far away from this goal. For the Brazilian Government, numbers matter.
more than quality when it comes to provide education. The new generation is getting the diplomas but market does not that it seriously.

Gil Lúcio Almeida

...the impoverished neighborhoods surrounding the campus see little need for philosophers." Of course not, it's not only economically that they're impoverished. I suppose many in positions of leadership do not see the need for philosophers either. Who wants all these people questioning everything, ah? I personally do not see the point in a degree in philosophy, but philosophy needs to be part of any degree.

The most relevant question regarding the present expansion is: will the better federal universities, like the main ones in Rio, Minas, Sao Paulo, and others, be kept well-funded so that they will be able to stay the course and attain competitive international status, like China is doing with part of their institutions (which would require a differentiated system), or will the whole system be brought down and have a lower and equalized level? Because it's is obvious that the amount of money required to bring all the newer and many older campuses up to the level of the few best ones is not and will not be available for some time in Brazil. So far, only the Sao Paulo state system has been able to produce and keep campuses that are internationally competitive. The federal system, if the central government pursues an egalitarian model, could go the way of the early (selective) public basic education system, that, as it expanded, had its quality reduced drastically. Brazil has been paying a high price for that, as the results in international assessment systems like Pisa show.

The central government has not been clear about that, most of the political forces in play are pointing to a less qualified egalitarian system. Those include the political parties in power, the unions inside the institutions, especially the newer ones, and the social organizations that advocate for an expansion at a faster rate and special treatment of low-income and minority students. All are valid political interests, especially in a country like Brazil, but the need of having some HEIs dedicated to developing the frontiers of science and technology, which requires heavy investment in recruiting top faculty and supporting expensive labs and facilities, cannot be underestimated if
Brazil wants to compete in the international arena. The government will have to face the political decision of differentiating its system, sooner or later. If nothing is done, the prospects are not very promising, the "natural" trend for the public federal system would be downward. And that system is responsible, up to now, for a good part of the academic output and the better qualified higher education in Brazil. Renato Pedrosa (University of Campinas, São Paulo).