Brazil's main concern is research quality at its universities, says adviser

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Rise in the number of private institutions is blamed for slipping standards

Source: AP/PA

Better, not just bigger: minister Henrique Paim noted drawbacks to rapid growth

Brazil is facing a major challenge in guaranteeing quality across its higher education sector as the number of private and technical courses grows, a senior adviser has warned.
Two per cent of programmes in Brazil lost their credentials last year for failing to meet standards, according to Rita Barata, consultant for evaluation and coordinator in public health with Capes, the Brazilian Federal Agency for the Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education. Speaking at the British Council’s Quality in Higher Education conference in Porto Alegre on 5 November, Dr Barata said the majority of those that lost their credentials were private institutions let down by their research quality.

“Private institutions don't have the research or they don't do good research. There are some exceptions but normally, the good research is [done] by the public universities,” she said.

“There are good institutions in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais but there’s a lot of very fragile institutions with a lot of problems with the quality of the personnel; the professors are not so prepared, they don’t have money to research.”

During the one-day conference at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazilian and European academics discussed the importance of quality assurance to internationalisation, along with methods for benchmarking.

One of the difficulties, Dr Barata said, was developing a way of testing new technical and professional courses.

“We have a lot of programmes in professional subjects,” she added. “We need another kind of evaluation for this type of programme; it’s totally different from research papers and books. There isn’t an international standard for that. We need to develop some indicators and standards.”

Earlier this year, the closure of some universities was blamed for the first drop in graduate numbers in a decade.

Henrique Paim, Brazil’s education minister, said at the time that guaranteeing the quality of courses was as important as expansion. “[The closure of universities] is not worrying because there is a greater concern about quality,” Mr Paim said.

Stephen Jackson, director of reviews at the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency, said the UK had also faced difficulties in maintaining standards after growth in the number of private colleges.

But he said that since the introduction of Tier 4 visas and changes to immigration regulations, 160 private institutions had had to engage with the QAA.

Asked how robust Brazil’s quality assurance procedures were, Dr Jackson said: “It’s different. The real concern is with private institutions, which have really grown in number.”

International comparisons

“Quality is becoming increasingly internationalised,” he added. “As we move forward, there are inevitable questions about international benchmarking, about comparing higher education systems in one country with another, about providing public assurance.

“We are a long way from a generally accepted set of common standards, particularly in the professional areas,” said Dr Jackson. “There’s a lot to be done in a European context to ensure we have genuinely comparable standards. I don’t think national systems are going to be sufficient.”

Among the participants at the conference was Malcolm Press, pro vice-chancellor at the University of Birmingham, who said quality assurance was important for potential academic partners as well as students.

“It’s a very, very busy marketplace,” said Dr Press, whose institution shares an office in Brazil with the University of Nottingham. “What we need to think about is which universities to collaborate with, which areas [to work in] and what is right for each of these international institutions.

“We can't work with everybody but we need to work with the people who deliver the best outcomes both for education and for research.”

The conference was organised as part of the British Council’s Global Education Dialogues series. A source at the council said the ultimate aim was a bilateral agreement that recognises British-Brazilian academic standards.

One of the British initiatives aimed at fostering relationships between the two countries is the Newton Fund. Brazil will be the third-biggest beneficiary of the scheme, which was launched in May and is intended to increase academic partnerships with developing countries.

Meanwhile, the UK is the second most popular destination for scholars on Brazil’s Science Without Borders exchange programme, the second phase of which has just been announced.

But in Dr Barata’s opinion, higher education in Brazil still needs fundamental domestic improvements.
"In Brazil, the idea is that a university has to do everything in every area and I think this is a problem – we lack focus," she said.

"Second, we have a very precarious infrastructure in Brazil to welcome students and to welcome professors.

"Finally, our teaching process is extremely traditional. Unless we change the way we work with our standards, we won't be able to take this leap forward. We need to truly transform our universities. Without implementing these basic changes, we will not get there."