

294 Politics, Policies, and the crusade against science: higher education research and evaluation under a denialist government in Brazil

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Our proposal is to analyze the impact of the breakdown of institutional logic in the evaluation system in the last Brazilian Presidency on the forms of collaboration between researchers and policymakers. From a privileged point of view of a collaboration of more than 8 years between LAPES (Laboratório de Pesquisa em Ensino Superior) and Inep, we will analyze the official model of evaluation of the higher education system in Brazil and the types of participation of researchers from outside the institution (participation in Conaes and individual consultancy work).

Based on the institutional agency approach, we will analyze how INEP's researchers resisted the onslaughts of negationism and sought support from the academic community in the area of education and evaluation, ensuring the resilience of institutional values. We analyze the types of theoretical/ methodological contributions proposed by groups of researchers in the development of social indicators related to the higher education system.

Full paper

Both the Brazilian Ministry of Education and other governmental research and evaluation institutions, such as Inep (National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira) and CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development), are bureaucratic structures that have been well established since the 1950s. For most of the time, including the period of civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985), there was extensive cooperation between them and the academic community. Although conflicts and political disputes around educational reforms and interventions were common throughout that period, they used to be based on models and perspectives guided by minimally scientific principles, therefore open to evidence-based argument and debate.

The participation of the academic community in building expansion policies for the Brazilian education system was quite expressive in such a framework. Examples include policies for reducing illiteracy, improving learning in basic education, and universalization of primary education. Policies for higher education followed the same pattern, as illustrated by the 1968 University Reform, which was a major step forward, despite having had paradoxical effects on the modernization of Brazilian higher education, and the Quotas Law for federal institutions of higher education, which has expanded access for students from a disadvantaged background.

The longstanding cooperation between the bureaucratic structure established in Brazil to foster research and academic training and the academic community provides a unique case for understanding how such an institutional and social arrangement was able to withstand the attacks of an openly science denialist government. The Bolsonaro administration (2019-2022) has turned the Ministry of Education into a circus where corrupt evangelical pastors and "flat-earther" politicians tried to impose a conservative agenda of customs by weakening the school institution and alienating the academic community.

Inep was surrounded and suffered numerous attempts to control the different evaluation systems. The Brazilian President tried to intervene in the contents and items of the tests and all the technicians responsible for the evaluation resigned from their positions.

Our proposal is to analyze the impact of the breakdown of institutional logic in the evaluation system in the indicated period on the forms of collaboration between researchers and policymakers. From a privileged point of view of a collaboration of more than 8 years between LAPES (Higher Education Research Laboratory) and Inep, we will analyze the official model of evaluation of the higher education system in Brazil and the types of participation of researchers from outside the institution. Two forms will be privileged in this analysis: participation in Conaes (National Commission for Evaluation of Higher Education) and individual consultancy work.

By definition, institutional logics results from the work of many actors, with a plethora of interests, values, desires, and resources. So, this research focuses on the characterization of actors and their patterns of action in an essential nucleus for the definition of the rules and forms of evaluation systems in Brazil.

Based on the institutional agency approach, we will try to analyse how INEP's researchers resisted the onslaughts of negationism and sought support from the academic community in the area of education and evaluation, ensuring the resilience of institutional values. On the other hand, we will analyse the types of theoretical and methodological contributions proposed by groups of researchers in the development of social indicators related to the higher education system.

Through interviews with managers and technicians of INEP, analysis of documents that guide the elaboration and application of the examinations of evaluation of the students, and systematization of the scientific academic debate on the results and limits of the different stages of the evaluation, we seek to examine the impact of the negationist perspective on the most important centre of production of knowledge about higher education in the country.

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