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Developing Internal Support for Quality and Relevance

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Preface

Higher education in Brazil is approaching a crossroads. The old model, a publicly funded system for the few, is centered on an elite and will not serve the country's needs in the 21st century. The Government of Brazil, with the World Bank's cooperation, is exploring a range of alternatives that address the most critical issues in Brazilian higher education:

- *Increasing Coverage:* A demographic bulge of young Brazilians is reaching university age. They will have more high school diplomas and higher educational aspirations than any previous generation. The current system provides education for less than 10 percent of the age cohort and is ill-equipped to meet the growing demands. To respond to this challenge, the higher education system will have to become more diverse, higher quality, and less expensive.
- *Restructuring Funding Mechanisms to Support Institutional Autonomy and Incentives for Efficiency.* Rigidities throughout the higher education system have institutionalized a system whose costs are on par with those of OECD countries but whose quality is not. A reexamination of funding and regulation mechanisms, and the incentives they create, is critical to improving quality and efficiency.
- *The Role of the Federal Government: Provider, Funder, and Regulator of Higher Education.* The last major reform of higher education took place in 1968. Currently, federal support for higher education is channeled almost exclusively to federal universities (and overwhelmingly for salaries). Little consideration has been given to the appropriate roles of the federal government in a diversified higher education system.
- *Quality of Instruction.* Quality assurance systems at the institutional and national levels are weak, rigid, and politicized. They do not encourage diversity or flexibility of the curriculum.
- *Stakeholders: The Political Realities of Change.* Many of the system problems are well known and widely discussed within Brazil. Opponents to change in the higher community come from the country's most capable and politically mobile/influential groups and are often fortified by strong legal (even constitutional) and bureaucratic protection. Any viable policy change must strategically deal with potentially strong and well-organized political opposition.

The eight papers in this series are a systematic examination of the problems and policy options for Brazilian education.

This paper, by Elaine El-Khawas, reviews approaches designed to offer internal support for quality improvement that may be relevant for Brazilian higher education. Decisions need to be appropriate to circumstances within each country and to the government's broader objectives, but recent precedents in other countries offer experience that could be adapted to the Brazilian context.

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Introduction

As systems of quality assurance have developed in most countries, initial attention typically has been directed to external mechanisms to ensure quality assurance. This has been the case in Brazil in recent years, with the introduction of strengthened accreditation procedures and a system of national exit examinations designed to measure the effectiveness of university programs.

Quality assurance initiatives have been controversial in many countries and sometimes have been modified or reversed after a short time. Even when national efforts become established, questions remain about whether they will lead to improvement within universities (Neave, 1998). Many observers contend that external requirements create a compliance mentality within universities, with little or no impact on educational programs. Others argue that external mechanisms alone are not enough; they need to be balanced by changes in the culture of universities, both to direct more attention to teaching and learning and to develop stronger internal procedures for program review and improvement (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

In Brazil, accreditation and quality assurance responsibilities have been shared by the Secretariat for Higher Education (SESU) and the National Council for Education (CNE), as the principal part of the National Evaluation System for Higher Education. A major achievement with respect to quality assurance has been the establishment of the Exame Nacional de Cursos, an evaluation instrument for institutional performance. Despite this measure and increased legislative leeway, the external evaluation system has (a) yet to develop a comprehensive and appropriate system of academic standards to develop, and (b) been preoccupied with the quasi-judicial regulation of the private higher education system (See Schwartzman), *Brazilian Higher Education: the Stakeholders* pp.4-5). A number of complicated interests intersect in this process, and the result is that the assurance of academic quality may get pushed to the background. This argues for developing greater internal support for quality assurance. This should be done while remaining aware of the intricacies and challenges of regulating a system with several types and level of quality of institutions, each with a particular set of concerns and interests.

Table 1: Higher Education Institutions by Type, 1996

Type of Institution	Number	Enrollment	Faculty
Universities	136	1,209,400	102,685
Federal	39	373,880	40,492
State	27	204,819	22,911
Municipal	6	47,432	3,135
Private	64	583,269	36,147
Multiple-Faculty Facilities	143	245,029	15,725
Public	11	8,681	821
Private	132	236,348	14,904
Single-Faculty Facilities	643	414,100	29,910
Public	128	100,615	7,307
Private	51	313,485	22,603
Total	922	1,868,529¹	148,320

A key issue, crucial to effective policy implementation, is whether higher education institutions have the internal capacity to respond appropriately to new pressures for quality improvement. Thus, if universities are to make good use of examination scores, accreditation visits, and self-evaluations, they must have the skills and resources to examine their programs critically and to know how to improve them. Put differently, the issue is whether capacity-building is needed within higher education institutions to ensure that the new quality assurance initiatives will result in change (World Bank, 1994).

Based on recent policy actions in a range of countries, many governments believe that universities need stronger internal capacity for change. In Europe, most governments now expect comprehensive self-studies by universities. In Mexico, the government expects the self-studies to lead to detailed plans for institutional development. Australia has set up national agencies to spur internal curricular improvement. New proposals in the United Kingdom would significantly increase attention to the teaching skills of academic staff members.

It is likely that Brazilian universities have weak internal procedures for curriculum review and improvement. The system's reliance on nationally developed curricula, the strength of academic tradition in many universities, the wide range in the size of institutions, and in the qualifications of teaching staff (Schwartzman and Balbachevsky, 1996) all suggest that there is limited capacity within universities for undertaking significant program review and improvement. About 16 percent of current faculty hold Ph.D's, for example.

To support its national programs for quality assurance, the Brazilian government should consider taking steps to balance external quality assurance with actions to strengthen

¹ This figure does not include graduate students, who numbered approximately 67,000 in 1996 according to MEC. IBGE figures for enrollment in 1996, which are based on its national household survey, show 1,784,000 undergraduates and 131,393 graduate students. The discrepancy of 4.4% in undergraduates may be due to the difference between nominal and actual enrollment. The discrepancy of 97% in graduate figures may be due to survey respondents in short (specialization) courses reporting themselves as graduate students.

the capacity for quality improvement inside the universities. Such initiatives could serve multiple purposes: first, to support accreditation and other external quality assurance efforts; second, to strengthen or introduce university procedures for both quality improvement and curriculum renewal; and, third, to increase the amount of attention given to effective teaching and learning.

The accreditation and reaccreditation process, as it becomes fully established, will depend on the ability of all universities to use results from self-evaluations and exit examinations to identify and carry out needed changes in their programs. The accreditation reviews will, themselves, depend on identifying (or developing) a sufficient number of academics with the expertise and credibility to conduct reviews.

A stronger internal capacity is also needed to spur innovation and improvement in university programs. Substantial dropout rates and problems of excessive time to program completion are indirect indicators of a broad need for curriculum revision and updating, probably also for changes to improve the relevance of courses and programs to emerging needs in the Brazilian economy. As enrollments grow in the near future, the experience of other countries suggests that all Brazilian universities will face greater pressure to introduce new courses and to improve teaching if they are to achieve satisfactory outcomes for students (OECD, 1998). All teaching staff—senior professors, often preoccupied with research and other professional obligations; instructors who have heavy teaching responsibilities; and those who teach part-time—will need to assess how well their courses are working as well as consider how to improve them.

Designing an initiative to build capacity for quality improvement within universities requires several decisions. Intervention efforts could focus on individual academics or courses, or on entire degree programs or disciplines. Efforts could be directed uniformly to all institutions, to certain universities or types of universities, or to universities within certain regions.

This paper reviews approaches designed to offer internal support for quality improvement that may be relevant for Brazilian higher education. Decisions need to be appropriate to circumstances within each country and to the government's broader objectives, but recent precedents in other countries offer experience that could be adapted to the Brazilian context.

Strategies for Internal Quality Improvement

In most countries, traditional universities have derived their core identities and reputation from research and scholarship, and consequently have given limited attention to teaching strategies or to curriculum review. Most academics have gained their knowledge of teaching or curriculum issues indirectly, either from their doctoral training or simply through working within their academic department (Green, 1997). Relatively few university teachers, in any country, have expertise on teaching effectiveness, program evaluation, or curriculum development.

To strengthen institutional capacity for quality improvement, some governments have issued mandates that require greater attention to teaching and learning. Others have adopted a different model, using incentive funding and technical assistance to universities. As in other spheres, the choice is to use a carrot or a stick, or some combination of the two.

In the US, a number of state governments have recently imposed quite specific mandates to improve the quality of undergraduate education, including requirements that senior professors at state universities teach first-year students or that professors get pay raises only if they have a full teaching load. Other US states have required state universities to monitor their performance on several indicators and to report their results publicly. In the United Kingdom, the government has required, as part of its teaching assessments, that some instructors be directly observed in the classroom by external visitors. Under a recent proposal, the UK may require academic staff members to submit evidence of effective teaching or participate in obligatory training programs on a regular basis (THES, Sept. 11 1998; Sept. 25, 1998).

Experience over the last decade suggests that external mandates to spur internal quality improvement have had limited results (Moses, 1995; Harmon, 1998; El-Khawas, 1998). Some studies have found that teaching is given more attention today and that institutions have changed many internal procedures because of external mandates (Banta, 1993; Brennan, Frederiks, and Shah, 1997), but no general evidence has yet emerged to show improvement in student progress and achievement.

In this context, it is useful to consider the experience of some countries that have used incentive approaches, based on competitive funds for quality improvement. In 1990, Sweden set up a national agency to operate a competitive grant program for projects designed to improve undergraduate education. Australia also has had substantial experience with the incentive grant model; two different agencies have funded efforts to improve teaching and learning at its universities. While the programs in Sweden and Australia differ in many details, both follow an incentive model. The general structure is a competitive grant mechanism, in which proposals aimed at fostering increased quality of teaching and learning are submitted in accordance with program guidelines and priorities. Then, following procedures to obtain peer ratings and review, the agency makes a limited number of grants annually for the best proposals.

The discussion that follows will review these two models in some detail, with brief comments about relevant experience in the US and other countries. To facilitate this review, the discussion is organized in terms of different components of the Swedish and Australian

programs. The core program—focused on institutional quality improvement—is described first, followed by attention to other components.

1. Grants for Quality Improvement

These programs are designed to fund substantial projects that universities have proposed as ways to strengthen the quality, effectiveness, and relevance of their courses or academic programs. Projects may involve a new approach to introductory-level courses or a major redesign of an entire course program. They may propose different examination methods, new teaching strategies, or other improvements likely to have significant impact.

Australia's Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) took this approach, operating a competitive fund in which grants were awarded to the best proposals submitted each year. CAUT supported many projects "aimed at improving the range and quality of approaches to teaching and learning" (Linke, 1995). Its successor agency, the Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development, operates a similar program, especially encouraging proposals that will "lead to practical advances in teaching, learning and/or assessment." Sweden's Council for the Renewal of Undergraduate Education also operates this way, awarding improvement grants to academic departments on the basis of competitive proposals (Jalling and Carlsson, 1995).

This type of fund may have several subprograms. The Swedish Council has used its grant mechanism to fund targeted programs in environmental studies and in undergraduate mathematics education, as well as programs involving IT in teacher training and computer-assisted medical training. Programs could be targeted for curriculum improvement at certain types of institutions or could emphasize skills in program evaluation to improve institutional capability to conduct self-evaluations.

2. Grants for Innovation

A few governments offer a different model. In designing their grants program for quality improvement, they have given priority to imaginative and innovative approaches to improvement. The purpose is to give support to those institutions and academics who want to try a broader kind of change or tackle problems in large-scale, systemic ways. The Australian agency, CAUT, took part of this approach. It encouraged projects "likely to lead to significant improvements in the quality of student learning," and specifically excluded from its competitive grants program any submission that dealt only with curriculum development. The Open Society Fund has given funds to several institutions in Central Europe to support large-scale innovations, e.g., restructuring disciplines or diversifying undergraduate programs (Darvas, 1995). Denmark has established a Centre designed to spur innovation in a specific area, technology-supported teaching.

The United States operates a grants program for innovative projects, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. FIPSE, an agency of the national government, has had a small budget but has consistently supported institutional projects promising innovative approaches in support of two broad national objectives: to improve the quality of higher education and to increase access to education beyond high school (FIPSE 1998). Popular and well-regarded, the Fund has operated for more than 25 years, typically awarding

grants of about \$50,000 to \$100,000 to support many worthwhile innovations. It deserves credit, too, for fostering a high regard for innovation throughout US higher education.

Some US states have operated their own funds for innovation. In Ohio, a competitive grants program, Funds for Excellence, called for universities to propose major new initiatives to build excellence within their programs. In New Jersey, a Challenge Grant program operated during the 1980s, in which the state made sizable awards (\$1 million or more over several years) that allowed several universities to implement major changes in institutional direction. One university redirected its entire curriculum to practical training linked with industry settings, while another university introduced an international component into all of its course programs.

3. Teaching Grants (to Individual Academics)

Australia currently sponsors a competition for National Teaching Development grants, in which individual academics are funded to carry out practical projects to increase their teaching effectiveness. Projects may involve developing new teaching tools or spurring wider use of effective teaching processes. Teams of academics can propose projects under this grant, including teams within and across institutions. Sweden's Teacher Exchange also supports individual academics. In operation since 1994, 100 Swedish academics each year have the opportunity to teach in a counterpart department in another country, with an academic from that department coming to Sweden.

4. Recognition and Award Programs

These programs, aimed at raising the status of teaching among academic staff members, recognize that the traditions and reward structures within higher education give strong weight to research and scholarship, thus creating a *disincentive* for academic staff members to give attention to teaching and curricular matters. To counter this bias, teaching awards have been established in a number of countries, sometimes within universities and sometimes as national programs. These approaches aim to give recognition to outstanding teachers and in doing so, to increase visibility and give higher status to good teaching.

In the early 1990s, Sweden established a program to honor and recognize outstanding teaching. It created a Society of Pedagogues, comprised of professors who have earned the high regard of their students and colleagues for teaching excellence. The society is designed to be prestigious, only a limited number of members are nominated for their record and reputation as teachers. They meet regularly to discuss issues in undergraduate education, they are also called upon as experts on teaching and learning matters, and are given special opportunities to speak and travel.

Australia has also sponsored a national program designed to raise the profile and status of good teaching. Under this program, one or two National Teaching Fellows were selected for recognition each year, and given financial support to prepare papers and give addresses on educational topics.

In the United States, many universities make annual awards for teaching excellence; a national program also exists, in which a professional association sponsors a *professor of*

the year program that names both national and regional award recipients. Mexico has a major program that gives national recognition to outstanding members of the academic staff, but it is based primarily on research and scholarly excellence.

5. Programs for Professional Development

Under this approach, governments support programs in which academic staff members attend workshops, usually up to a week in length, designed to increase their subject-matter knowledge or teaching skills. In the United States, one government agency supports seminars in the sciences, while another agency sponsors summer institutes for academics in the humanities. Workshops may be organized by national scholarly and professional groups, each devoted to the issues relevant to their field.

These programs allow academics to gain new skills and to become more familiar with good teaching practices. Workshops can have specific purposes, for example, with one program for new faculty and another for established faculty. Programs may focus on specific topics, e.g., on teaching issues one year and, in another year, program evaluation.

As a variation, the Australian government sponsored training opportunities for many years for those members of academic staff who wished to upgrade their academic credentials, which were especially needed after the government mandated a large number of institutional mergers.

6. Commissioned Studies

In Australia, the objectives underlying the incentive grant programs were complemented by the agency's sponsorship of several commissioned studies on teaching and learning matters. These studies, one looking closely at the experiences of students during their first year of university study, another examining approaches that give greater recognition and rewards to good teaching, encouraged nationwide discussion on these important issues.

In Sweden, commissioned studies were also employed as a way to call attention to educational and curricular matters. The Swedish studies were organized as discipline-focused reviews. In mathematics, economics, and history, for example, small teams of well-regarded academics conducted studies that identified significant teaching developments in other countries.

Toward an Incentive Approach to Quality Improvement

Most of the precedents for internal quality improvement reviewed in this paper reflect a bias toward allowing universities to take responsibility for improving their academic programs. An underlying premise is that long-term results for quality improvement are best achieved by changing the *culture* within academic institutions. The government role is to spur a faster pace of change through necessary policy changes and, potentially too, through special funding that rewards those institutions that have well-planned proposals for improvement. Although the incentive models reviewed here have

been developed in different national contexts, they offer policy tools that could be adapted to Brazil's circumstances.

The Brazilian government has already begun an important initiative to press for increased quality, effectiveness, and relevance in higher education. To move this agenda forward, the key recommendation of this paper is that current programs for quality improvement, which emphasize external requirements, be balanced by the introduction of some form of support for university-based initiatives to improve teaching, programs, and results for students.

Brazil should consider establishing a national Fund or similar mechanism to direct a competitive grants program aimed at spurring internal quality improvement. The Fund should be set up as a semi-independent agency, separate from the accreditation council, and given a mandate to conduct a long-term program in support of teaching and curriculum quality. Its agenda should be national in scope but offer diverse programs adapted to different needs.

The major program of the Fund should be directed to grants for quality improvement, awarded to universities to support substantial efforts aimed at improvement. This grants program would have several purposes, mainly to build institutional capability (i.e., structures, offices, or staff positions; procedures for reviewing programs and introducing changes in curriculum) as well as to help institutions develop evidence about effectiveness and to use that evidence as a source of program improvement. One option with this grant program is to emphasize innovation, a more ambitious effort than curriculum development alone.

Apart from this major focus, the Fund might also operate a small grants program, supporting individual academics. One purpose is to offer opportunities for interested teachers to improve their teaching skills and to learn about good teaching. A second purpose of a small-grants program is longer-term: to increase the number of academics who have expertise on curriculum review and development and on the evaluation of academic programs. This part of the fund could support the upgrading of faculty credentials, possibly as an expansion of current government initiatives of this type. However, in designing this fund, several policy issues should be balanced: to what extent should resources be directed to upgrading the content knowledge of faculty through support for additional credentials? How much should be given, instead, to improving the teaching skills of current faculty?

For Brazil, these two components of the Fund—quality improvement grants and small grants to individual academics—could be modified to serve specific purposes or to fit particular circumstances. Other components could also be added. So too, the Fund's operations should be supported by other government policies that increase institutional flexibility in creating a culture of quality; this may include, for example, policies that allow faculty positions to be reallocated in accordance with emerging demands. Several other issues must be considered, especially the level of importance to be assigned to the Fund. In both Sweden and Australia, incentive-funding programs were set up on a trial basis for about three years, then extended following a good result. Sweden's Council saw its budget begin quite small, then double, and double again as it established a good track record. In

Australia, CAUT operated as a low-profile fund in the context of a much more high-profile government initiative, the Committee on Quality Assurance.

A major decision in designing the Fund involves how the grants program would be structured. One option is to develop a thematic focus, possibly with several areas for priority attention, and invite all institutions to submit proposals that respond to these priorities. Proposals could be invited for projects to reduce dropout rates or to introduce new courses in strategically important subjects.

Another option is to set up separate competitions for different types of institutions, e.g., with separate programs for universities and for university centers, or with one program for federal and state institutions and another for private institutions. In view of the geographic size and regional diversity in Brazil, the Fund might support the development of collaborative networks to work together on quality improvement. The Fund might, for example, give a grant to a network of several universities within a region or to a cluster of small private institutions. It might encourage proposals from professional associations wishing to restructure an entire course program. A set of high-quality universities may wish to propose a collaborative effort.

Brazil's future depends on a stronger system of higher education, able to offer effective teaching and relevant, well-designed academic programs in line with the needs of a growing economy. Improving the current system depends importantly on increasing the voice and presence of the many academics, students, and managers in the universities who would genuinely like to support an effort to improve their institutions (Schwartzman, 1998).

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