



# Thinking Brazil

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*Research Highlights from Brazil Institute Fellows and Scholars: Elizabeth Balbachevsky*

## Brazil's High Education Responses to the Global Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Higher education is increasingly perceived in the developing world as the key to a country's successful insertion into the global economy, creating new educational demands that provoke intense pressure for institutional reform. As in many other areas, these educational reforms extensively borrow procedures and objectives from the reform experiences of the developed world. Nevertheless, the diffusion of these new values should not be viewed as a simple transplantation or importation, but rather as a process of reconstruction and



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negotiation on the local level between reformers and other state and societal stakeholders to mesh with the prior institutional framework and address new societal expectations.

Since the 1990s, universities in emerging countries have been expected to deliver not just credentials, but also certification, international networks, research, and *real* instruction. On July 24, 2006, *Elizabeth Balbachevsky*, Woodrow Wilson Center Public Policy Scholar and Associate Professor of Political Science, Universidade de São Paulo, presented her research on the evolution of Brazil's system of higher education and the impact of recent reforms. George Washington University Professor of International Education *William K. Cummings* commented on her research, which analyzed the reforms taking place in Brazil and interpreted the impact of such processes over the work



conditions of Brazil's academic professionals. Such analysis is essential for understanding the changes in the higher education system taking shape not only in Brazil but throughout the developing world, as it sheds light on the future of the academic profession, explaining higher education reform as a national response to the global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although Brazil's higher education system is relatively new—the first Brazilian university was founded in 1920—Balbachevsky noted that the most recent census revealed a massive and highly diversified system of over 4 million students attending over 2,000 institutions, of which 170 are universities. While public institutions make up only 11 percent of all institutions of higher education, 50 percent of universities are public, accounting for 80 percent of the country's graduate enrollment. Balbachevsky argued that many private institu-



WILLIAM K. CUMMINGS

approaches designed to promote better performance and a stronger link between institutions and the productive sector. These reforms encouraged differentiation within the private sector, she argued, and created a more competitive environment for higher education as a whole.

When elected president in 2002, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva sought to reverse the process of educational institution privatiza-

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tions, which today account for 70 percent of undergraduate enrollments, grew out of the sudden boom in demand for higher education in the 1960s and the government's subsequent relaxation of constraints over the private sector.

The economic reforms of the 1990s increased demands on the system of higher education to improve the quality of education and academic research, Balbachevsky explained. In response, the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso adopted new

tion, and focused his attention away from education and onto issues pertaining to social inclusion and minority access. New regulations prevented public universities from charging tuition, raising and managing money independently, or introducing any measure for external assessment. These regulations increased the dependence of public institutions on the state, explained Balbachevsky. However, given recent pressure on the government to balance the budget, the state has been unable to provide

the necessary funding, resulting in a shortage of resources, salary constraints, and little incentive for individual academic initiatives. Lula's government has also placed stringent restrictions on the private sector to create similitude with the public institutions. These restrictions, according to Balbachevsky, were unnecessary budgetary burdens on private institutions causing them to cut salaries and halted the process of differentiation that began in the 1990s.

In this environment, the recent increase in demand for higher education and pressures to improve quality are not being met by institutions of higher education, Balbachevsky asserted. She added that, despite the recent awareness in Brazilian society that academic research and science can upgrade the country's position in

the world economy, the new regulations only reinforce past tendencies that insulate academic institutions from the surrounding society and weaken the country as a whole.

Balbachevsky concluded by noting that input indicators (rather than outputs) are still used to measure institutional performance, creating opportunistic behavior among both private and public institutions rather than actual improvements in quality. She added that one of the greatest challenges is to reverse the inward orientation of the academic community—indeed, fewer than 20 percent of professors have contact with the international community. This is exacerbated by the fact that the insularity of Brazilian academia is not viewed as a problem by society. ■

## Elizabeth Balbachevsky



Elizabeth Balbachevsky is a Woodrow Wilson Center Public Policy Scholar and Fulbright New Century Scholar. She is Associate Professor of Political Science at the *Universidade de São Paulo*, and Senior Researcher for its Higher Education Research Unit. In 2002, Balbachevsky served as a visiting scholar at the Centre for Higher Education Studies (CHES) at the Institute of Education, University of London. She has researched issues in Higher Education since the early 1990s. She co-directed the first national survey on Brazil's academic profession in 1992, and directed the second survey in 2003. Balbachevsky has also worked as a consultant with the Brazilian Federal Agency for support of Graduate Education (CAPES) and took part in cross-national studies about Higher Education reforms in emerging countries. In early 2006 she joined a task-force at the São Paulo State Secretary of Science and Technology for

building a statewide database of information on public sector institutions of higher education in the state. Selected publications include "Graduate Education: Emerging Challenges to a Successful Policy" (2004) in Brock, and Schwartzman's *The Challenges of Education in Brazil*; with M.C. Quintero, and, "From Encirclement to Globalization: Evolving Patterns of Higher Education in Brazil" (2000) in McMullen, Mauch, and Donnorummo's *Emerging Markets and Higher Education*.



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