

Accounting professionalisation in Brazil: Resistance and co-optation in the introduction of a professional entry exam (1999–2010)

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Abstract

Using actor–network theory, this study investigates how the CFC (*Conselho Federal de Contabilidade – Federal Council of Accounting*) in Brazil transformed into a full-fledged professional accounting body with entry controls. The CFC lacked an entry control mechanism after its establishment in 1946, but introduced a professional entry exam in 2010 after failed attempts between 1999 and 2004. In 2004, resistance from higher education accounting students and the Brazilian Ministry of Education led to the suspension of the non-legislated entry examination that the CFC had administered since 1999. After 2004, the CFC co-opted resisting actors and reframed its move by invoking the emerging national agenda of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) adoption. The CFC used this agenda to facilitate co-optation with the state by justifying the need to bring Brazil's accounting regulatory landscape into line with international best practices suited to IFRS-based reporting.

Keywords

accounting professionalisation, actor–network theory, Brazil, closure, framing/overflowing, translation

Introduction

This study examines the first attempt by the CFC (*Conselho Federal de Contabilidade – Federal Council of Accounting*) to institutionalise a professional entry exam in 1999, the exam's suspension in 2004 and the changed strategies and circumstances that facilitated the successful re-establishment of the exam requirement in 2010. This study is particularly interested in the contested role

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of professional entry exams as a tool for identifying professionals who are qualified to provide public service (see Abbott, 1988: 4).¹ The CFC was established in 1946, but it lacked market control features because it did not introduce entry restrictions. The lack of entry control is associated with the state-led nature of the council's foundation, which did not originate from an occupational group movement for jurisdictional control (Agrizzi and Sian, 2015). This study investigates the CFC's experience using the following overarching research question: *How did the CFC successfully re-introduce a professional entry exam despite its failed first attempt?*

The accounting profession gained renewed attention from researchers in light of emerging issues linking the profession to broader societal goals (Walker, 2016) and global trends (Annisette and Trivedi, 2013; Carter et al., 2015). Previous closure studies have largely been conducted through a neo-Weberian conceptual lens concerned with jurisdictional control through closure strategies (Abbott, 1988: 60; Caramanis, 2005; Coronella et al., 2015; Larson, 1977: 38; Waring, 2014; Willmott, 1986). The neo-Weberian framework has been extensively employed in the study of accounting professionalisation in Western empirical contexts whereby occupational groups engage in competition for jurisdictional control, largely with the neutral, mediating role of the state (Chua and Poullaos, 1993, 1998). However, this framework may not fully explain accounting professionalisation processes and outcomes in some empirical contexts. For example, in Brazil, the state rather than occupational group competition is the prime driver of the CFC's emergence. To accommodate a broad range of political-economic contexts and diverse processes and outcomes of closure attempts in professionalisation, prior studies (Chua and Poullaos, 1993; Evans, 2018) recommend focusing on occupational group strategies to attain market closure and associated outcomes without a priori assumptions.

In this study, we employ actor-network theory (ANT) (Callon, 1986, 1998; Callon et al., 1983; Latour, 2013) to examine the CFC's unsuccessful attempt to introduce a professional entry exam (1999–2004) and its establishment of a successful network of support to secure legislative backing for the exam (2005–2010). In doing so, we situate our analysis in the context of broader socioeconomic developments in Brazil. The CFC introduced an accounting entry exam requirement in 1999 without legislative backing. However, this requirement was terminated in 2004 following a court challenge and was re-introduced through legislation in 2010 (Castro, 2017). This study illustrates the fluidity of the professional regulatory landscape and its changes in a complex process of struggles in which networks of support for the CFC's professional entry exam were established. Such networks are transient and break down or consolidate as new network dynamics emerge (see Latour, 2013). This study illustrates that a stable network that is constructed using the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) adoption agenda has facilitated the co-optation of the state with the CFC to realise closure through legislation. The IFRS agenda enabled the re-interpretation of the role of the professional entry exam from the perspective of Brazil's socioeconomic goals.

This study contributes to accounting history literature in two main ways. First, it adopts an actor-based approach to analyse professional group movement for entry controls. In doing so, it employs an analytical framework that captures dynamic relationships among actors in the professionalisation process without making a priori assumptions about the goals of professionalisation and the relationships between professional groups and the state. Second, at the empirical level, the study extends the limited accounting professionalisation literature on developing and emerging economies other than former British colonies. Brazil provides a suitable empirical context because it is a former Portuguese colony that gained independence in the early nineteenth century. The accounting professionalisation process in Brazil illustrates the roles of domestic socioeconomic change and globalisation in driving professionalisation. The Brazilian experience can be contrasted with that of many former British colonies (Annisette, 2000, 2010). This study also extends the growing literature on the effects of global developments on accountancy in developing and

emerging economies as reflected by IFRS adoption (Hopper et al., 2017; Mihret and Bobe, 2014). Specifically, it presents evidence of how professional groups use the IFRS adoption agenda to reconfigure their alliance with the state to realise closure. In doing so, this study contributes to a non-functionalist interpretation of the role of IFRS adoption by documenting how IFRS adoption is invoked in advancing professional groups' goals.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section develops the analytical framework of the article based on ANT. The 'Research method' section outlines the research methods employed. The 'Brazil at the turn of the century and during the early twenty-first century' section provides an overview of the Brazilian accounting profession, economy and accounting education at the turn of the twentieth century and early in the twenty-first century. The 'Analysis of evidence: CFC's move to introduce an entry exam' section presents analysis of evidence based on the conceptual underpinnings established in the analytical framework. Finally, the last section concludes the article.

Analytical framework

Professional exams and the exercise of occupational closure

The critical literature considers professional entry exams an exclusionary tool that is employed to establish professional monopolies. Such exams are presented as a mechanism to assess specialised knowledge – that non-professionals are supposed to lack – and grant professional credentials (see Abbott, 1988: 4; Sian, 2006; Uche, 2002; Walker, 2004; Willmott, 1986; Yapa, 1999). Despite its achievements, the closure theory that underpins several prior professionalisation studies has been criticised on a few grounds.

First, the notion of a monopoly that underlies the concept of closure tends to lack tightness. For example, the nature of monopoly lacks clarity because it does not highlight possible differences among members of a professional association. Furthermore, it loses sight of the time-dependent and situated nature of monopoly (Chua and Poullaos, 1993, 1998). Second, neo-Weberian analysis of closure neglects the role of third parties and instead overestimates the role of the struggle between competing groups (Saks, 1983).

Third, the theory assumes a pluralist society and neglects the influence of historically contingent relationships between accounting and the state that affect the outcome of occupational closure moves. The role of the state in pluralist societies is conceived as restricted to adjudicating the interests of freely competing groups in society. This assumption reduces the utility of closure theory in investigating professionalisation experiences whereby the state plays an active role in the process. Given that societies can generally be organised based on the capitalist/market or statist 'logic', the neo-Weberian notion of closure would be efficacious in investigating professionalisation in the context of the former rather than the latter (Murphy, 1984). In contrast, neo-Marxist literature eschews this neo-Weberian assumption of a pluralist society and instead reveals a more active role of the state in shaping the role of professions as a tool for the capitalist class. However, the neo-Marxist view also suffers from neglecting the dynamic accounting–state relationships (Chua and Poullaos, 1993). Prior studies emphasise the need to focus on occupation groups' time- and space-dependent strategies and outcomes without a priori specification of relationships among occupational groups' goals, strategies and closure outcomes (Chua and Poullaos, 1993; Evans, 2018; Murphy, 1984). A focus on the dynamic and complex process of constructing the rules of closure is suggested as a possible way to dispense with the limitations of closure-oriented analysis (Murphy, 1984). The professionalisation literature suggests the need to consider a broad range of relevant actors, including higher education institutions and the state (Burrage et al., 1990; Saks,

2016). In line with this, we argue that actor-based analysis enables an understanding of actors' goals, strategies and ensuing outcomes of professionalisation without assuming a tight coupling of the three. We consider ANT a suitable framework for this approach.

ANT and professionalisation

Further to the general trend of using actor-based approaches in the study of professionalisation (Burrage et al., 1990; Saks, 2016), recent studies have employed ANT to examine accounting–state relationships in general (Ezzamel and Xiao, 2015) and accounting professionalisation in particular (Gendron and Barrett, 2004; Gendron et al., 2007; Mihret et al., 2017). In this study, we draw on ANT to analyse the accounting–state dynamic pertaining to the CFC's move to introduce professional entry exams. ANT explains how actors influence the development of new ideas, technologies and practices in complex social contexts that involve power and interests. New ideas can originate from actors' interests and be influenced by socio-political factors that strengthen or weaken the network of support necessary to operationalise ideas and practices. Recent research has conceptualised professionalisation as the construction of a network by drawing on key concepts such as actors, actor networks and translation (Gendron and Barrett, 2004; Mihret et al., 2017).

The concept of translation is crucial to understanding the process by which actors transform ideas into practice amid possible resistance from – or with the support of – other actors. Actors attempt to shape the process to suit their interests and circumstances (Latour, 1986). A translation is initiated via a *problematization* in which actors define issues of interest to other actors and propose a course of action that signifies the former's *indispensable* role to the operationalisation of the proposed course of action (Bloomfield and Best, 1992; Callon, 1986). Some actors employ strategies to forge *alliances* with other actors, thereby establishing a network. A network in this sense refers to a set of connections among actors whereby important resources that stabilise the network are concentrated. Actors pursue strategies such as *co-optation* with other actors who share similar goals (Latour, 1986) or persuasion, negotiation and coercion (Singleton and Michael, 1993). Such strategies enable actors to strengthen the network through the possible *enrolment* of other actors to assume roles in the network (Gendron and Baker, 2005). However, the network's stability could be challenged by *competing networks* (Briers and Chua, 2001; Walsham, 1997).

In the process of constructing an actor network, actors engage in a framing exercise in the moment of problematisation. Framing refers to a part of problematisation that presents some actors as indispensable to the operationalisation of a proposed solution. Key actors develop a framing – that is, a boundary of the actor network – within which actors' interactions take place (Callon, 1998: 249) in a defined set of actors' relationships (Kastberg, 2014; Skærbæk, 2009). *Framing* involves articulating a conceptual specification of the boundary and actors' relationships within the boundary. That is, this concept shows how objects can move from being self-contained and undisputed to being disputed and their boundaries redrawn. Conversely, *overflowing* portends that the framing may often deviate from its initial articulation (Callon, 2002). Overflowing calls for a further problematisation of the prevalent framing through the identification and enrolment of relevant actors (Callon, 1986). The concepts in ANT provide suitable conceptual tools to analyse the professionalisation process in which professional bodies operationalise monopoly over professional services by controlling entry into professional practice. However, closure is not always guaranteed because 'ring fencing' that is too tight would invite the emergence of a competing network that might challenge the occupational monopoly (Walker and Shackleton, 1998).

Research method

This study is based on an analysis of the CFC's attempts to institutionalise a professional entry exam from 1999 to 2010. To facilitate an in-depth understanding of the phenomena of interest, we employed a qualitative research method using multiple qualitative data sources (e.g. Mihret et al., 2017; Safari and Parker, 2017). Data were obtained from three main sources: (1) publicly available transcripts of Brazilian Congress hearings; (2) reviews of recorded sources; and (3) in-depth key informant interviews. Transcripts of the Brazilian Congress hearings on the implementation of a professional entry exam for accountants are publicly available. The events that took place in the Brazilian Congress were recorded in the DSF (*Diário do Senado Federal* – Gazette of the Federal Senate) (e.g. DSF, 2005a, 2005b, 2010). The total word count of the transcripts from the Congress hearings of 2005 was approximately 21,000 words, from which we extracted speeches of representatives of key actor groups that influenced the process. The actor groups included the CFC, the MEC (*Ministério da Educação* – Ministry of Education), the OAB (*Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil* – Order of Attorneys of Brazil), the CFM (*Conselho Federal de Medicina* – Federal Council of Medicine), the CONFEA (*Conselho Federal de Engenharia e Agronomia* – Federal Council of Engineering and Agriculture) and the CFMV (*Conselho Federal de Medicina Veterinária* – Federal Council of Veterinary Medicine). Other secondary sources employed include publications of the CFC, legislation and published academic sources pertinent to the accounting profession in Brazil.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in Brasília and Rio de Janeiro in November and December 2015 with five key informants. The main actors directly involved in the process were the CFC, MEC, accounting schools and accounting students. In this study, the accounting students are represented by their national body FENECIC (*Federação Nacional dos Estudantes de Ciências Contábeis* – National Federation of Accounting Students). The purpose of selecting these interviewees was to obtain firsthand knowledge and understanding of the professional entry exam and insights into the process. Interview durations ranged from 45 minutes to one hour. The interviews were conducted in Brazilian Portuguese, audio-recorded and later transcribed to facilitate data analysis. A qualified service provider transcribed the recordings. The transcripts were then reviewed and translated into English by one of the researchers, who is bilingual. The researcher who conducted the interviews also checked the accuracy of the transcripts to ensure data quality.

While checking the accuracy of the original and translated transcripts, the researchers paid special attention to the risk of a translation gap. A translation gap is a disparity between original concepts in Brazilian Portuguese and its adaptation to English (Kamla and Komori, 2018; Malsch et al., 2011). There are challenges in literal translations from Brazilian Portuguese to English. For instance, Brazilian professional bodies are known as *conselhos de classe profissional*, literally translated as 'professional class councils', and the professional entry exam administered by such bodies is known as *exame de suficiência*, literally translated as 'sufficiency exam'. To avoid a disparity between concepts and aim for consistency, the terminology adopted in this study regarding accounting professionalisation in Brazil follows translations in similar previous studies (e.g. Agrizzi and Sian, 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2011, 2017). Therefore, a 'domestication' translation strategy was adopted (cf. Kamla and Komori, 2018). This translation strategy refers to the adoption of a terminology that avoids potentially conflicting foreign elements (Venuti, 1995), making the text 'fluent' and easily 'readable' in English (Xian, 2008).

Another important issue in translation is the use of colloquial language in interviews (Xian, 2008). To avoid a gap in translating colloquial Brazilian Portuguese to English, the researchers have chosen to eschew extended direct quotes from translated interview transcripts in colloquial language using a contextualised approach of translation. In this approach, the researchers aim for

Table 1. Participants' profiles.

Participants' reference number	Background	Date	Mode of data collection
Participant 1	Director of Education Policy and Deputy Secretary, MEC	8 November 2005	Public hearing session in the Congress
Participant 2	President of the Accreditation Exams and Board Member, OAB	8 November 2005	Public hearing session in the Congress
Participant 3	President, CFM	8 November 2005	Public hearing session in the Congress
Participant 4	President, CFC	8 November 2005	Public hearing session in the Congress
Participant 5	President, CONFEA	8 November 2005	Public hearing session in the Congress
Participant 6	Board Member, CFMV	8 November 2005	Public hearing session in the Congress
Participant 7	CFC official	18 November 2015	45-minute face-to-face interview (interview notes)
Participant 8	MEC official	18 November 2015	45-minute face-to-face interview (5,100-word transcript of the interview recording)
Participant 9	CFC official	19 November 2015	1-hour face-to-face interview (interview notes)
Participant 10	Accounting academic	24 November 2015	1-hour face-to-face interview (5,000-word transcript of the interview recording)
Participant 11	FENECIC official	2 December 2015	45 minute face-to-face interview (4,800-word transcript of the interview recording)

MEC: Ministry of Education; OAB: Order of Attorneys of Brazil; CFM: Federal Council of Medicine; CFC: Federal Council of Accounting; CONFEA: Federal Council of Engineering and Agriculture; CFMV: Federal Council of Veterinary Medicine; FENECIC: National Federation of Accounting Students.

contextual consistency rather than literal consistency between the languages used in the interview and in writing the paper (Xian, 2008).

To protect the identities of individual participants, reference numbers are assigned to interview participants. Table 1 summarises the profiles of the participants in the Brazilian Congress hearings and in-depth interviews.

The data were qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis through the actor–network theoretical lens for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns. An approach comprising six phases of thematic analysis was used: (1) familiarising with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87). A theme captures some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set and represents something important about the data in relation to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2013). The themes underpinning the paper's story were then identified, and relationships among the themes were interpreted to develop the overall argument.

Brazil at the turn of the century and during the early twenty-first century

Occupational ascendancy in Brazilian accountancy can be attributed to structural changes in the country's political, social and economic environments (Agrizzi and Sian, 2015). To provide a background to our analysis, we outline the historical backdrop of the CFC and provide an overview of the socio-political and economic changes that occurred in Brazil in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Historical sketch of the CFC

The creation of the professional accounting body in Brazil is consistent with experiences in other authoritarian regimes (Agrizzi and Sian, 2015), whereby centralised and authoritarian governments tended to be reluctant to delegate authority to groups such as professional associations. These governments often employ a state corporatist² arrangement in which the state organises professions so that they operate under close government control. Agrizzi and Sian (2015) suggest that accountants in Brazil obtained their status as a professional accounting body through this route, whereby the government offered patronage in return for political support. These associations are directly incorporated into the centralised hierarchical system of regulation and are employed by the government as instruments in legitimating policies (Agrizzi and Sian, 2015). The CFC was established in this context through the *Accounting Act* (i.e. Decree-Law 9,295 of 27 May 1946) as the sole authoritative professional accounting body. However, the CFC lacked professional entry control because it was not bestowed with the authority to administer professional entry exams. The CFC is composed of one representative from each state and federal district, thereby forming a structure known as the CFC/CRC system (Rodrigues et al., 2017).

The CFC is responsible for guiding, regulating and controlling the accounting profession through its local chapters, the CRCs (*Conselhos Regionais de Contabilidade* – Regional Accounting Councils), and can issue fines, reprimand accountants, suspend accountants' professional accreditation and even terminate accountants' professional accreditation (Resolution CFC no. 1.309/10).

The Brazilian economy in the late twentieth century

During the twentieth century, Brazil experienced rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. By the end of the century, Brazil's economy was threatened by hyperinflation, which had reached 46 per cent per month (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA), 2010). The economy regained stability in 1994 via the Plano Real policy measures, which led to a substantial change in Brazilian capital markets, including the introduction of rules that aimed to improve corporate governance and strong institutional development (Rodrigues et al., 2012). Immediately following Plano Real, companies sought to exploit the growth potential of the internal market. Furthermore, privatisation programmes created a considerable increase in foreign direct investment in Brazil.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, foreign companies substantially increased their investments in Brazil, seeking to participate in the expanding domestic market and set up export platforms for Latin American countries. The internationalisation of large national groups facilitated technology upgrades and enabled access to external sources of financing (IPEA, 2010). After a sharp devaluation in the Brazilian currency in 1999 and weak economic performance, companies adopted more active export strategies and commercial efforts, such as distribution rearrangements of production lines among branches of multinational corporations. Furthermore,

Brazil's foreign policy, especially since 2003, has afforded greater importance to the promotion of exports (Almeida, 2009; IPEA, 2010). In addition, Brazil sought greater geographical diversification for its exports with a focus on developing markets (IPEA, 2010). The government favoured multilateralism and maintaining international political, economic and trade relations with a view to strengthening its foreign economic and political position (Almeida, 2009).

Encouraged by an extremely benign international environment, Brazilian exports soared. However, in mid-2008, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) occurred amid strong economic growth (IPEA, 2009). Consequently, between late 2008 and early 2009, unemployment rates increased and the level of utilisation of installed industrial capacity dropped dramatically. From December 2008, the Brazilian government adopted several countercyclical measures. Rodrigues et al. (2012) argue that to support the development of capital markets, the Brazilian government decided to move away from a domestic to a global financial reporting system. Given Brazil's increasing global economic and financial integration, the convergence of national accounting rules with the IFRS was considered essential to improve the financial reporting of Brazilian corporations (Rodrigues et al., 2012).

Accounting education in Brazil

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Brazilian government showed increased interest in accounting education and professional expertise in accounting (Rodrigues et al., 2011). Encouraged by the emerging labour market and by the government itself, the number of commerce graduates from government-funded and non-government-funded accounting schools grew. The government showed a preference for appointing graduates of recognised commercial schools to public posts (Rodrigues et al., 2011) and introduced new accounting-related legislation to coincide with the national education reforms, because accounting services offered a valuable means of control in a period of rapid industrialisation (Agrizzi and Sian, 2015). The Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences of São Paulo was created, and it awarded a degree in accounting and actuarial sciences for the first time in 1946 (Rodrigues et al., 2011). Agrizzi and Sian (2015) note that, in Brazil, the state responded to calls from associations for improved standards of education.

In the 1990s, a major shift took place in the accounting education landscape. Graduate programmes in accounting experienced growth as a result of the economic stability brought about by Plano Real in 1994. In 1995, a total of 107,138 students were enrolled in 352 graduate programmes in accounting, and by 2010, these numbers had soared to 288,786 students enrolled in 1,104 programmes (Castro, 2017). Thus, Brazilians experienced diploma inflation in accounting in the 1990s and 2000s (Schwartzman, 1998). Since 2003, the government has focused on allocating spending across pre-primary, primary and secondary levels of schooling and enacting new laws to address regional inequalities in school access and school quality (Arends-Kuening, 2009). This development has provided opportunities for private investments to meet the demand for university-level degrees. Therefore, in addition to an increase in the number of enrolments, the proportion of students enrolled in non-government-funded accounting schools has increased substantially, from 69 per cent of all accounting student enrolments in 1995 to 82 per cent in 2010 (Castro, 2017). Therefore, non-government-funded schools have made a large contribution to the significant growth in accounting education (see Table 2).

The expansion of non-government-funded schools in Brazil raised concerns as the result of a diffused concept of quality (Schwartzman, 1998). The academic performance of students was regularly assessed through an examination called the ENADE (*Exame Nacional de Desempenho dos Estudantes* – National Examination of Student Performance) and analysed by the Instituto Nacional

Table 2. Tertiary accounting student numbers (1995–2010).

Year	Government-funded accounting schools		Non-government-funded accounting schools		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	
1995	33,389	31	73,749	69	107,138
1996	35,536	32	77,215	68	112,751
1997	36,043	31	80,226	69	116,269
1998	36,728	30	85,699	70	122,427
1999	34,154	27	93,541	73	127,695
2000	32,436	26	94,180	74	126,616
2001	33,119	25	100,747	75	133,866
2002	34,519	24	109,593	76	144,112
2003	36,381	23	118,488	77	154,869
2004	37,817	23	123,844	77	161,661
2005	42,111	24	132,509	76	174,620
2006	37,391	20	151,587	80	188,978
2007	44,379	22	158,449	78	202,828
2008	59,381	25	178,596	75	237,977
2009	47,574	20	187,568	80	235,142
2010	47,107	18	218,057	82	265,164

Source: Data compiled from information available from the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP) at Sinopses Estatísticas da Educação Superior – Graduação (<http://portal.inep.gov.br>).

de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP), a government agency linked to the MEC (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Assessments of academic performance consistently showed that students who enrolled in non-government-funded accounting schools had lower levels of academic performance than their government-funded counterparts (INEP, 2006, 2009, 2012).

Analysis of evidence: CFC's move to introduce an entry exam

This section analyses the establishment of the professional entry exam in Brazil in 1999, its suspension in 2004 and its re-introduction in 2010. Key actors in this process included the MEC, accounting schools, the CFC, the national agency representing accounting students (FENECIC) and other professional agencies such as the OAB. Table 3 shows the concerns and goals of the actors involved in the process and sets out the issues from an ANT perspective. Accounting students were concerned that the high failure rate of professional entry exams would limit their chances of accessing the professional accountancy market. Conversely, the CFC invoked public interest in its mission to ensure quality in the face of an overflow resulting from an accounting explosion (i.e. diploma inflation resulting from a boom in accounting schools). The CFC presented its role as indispensable by underscoring its role in administering professional entry exams to ensure that a minimum level of competence is achieved. However, another major actor – the MEC – viewed the CFC's move as an encroachment on the MEC's domain of authority. Furthermore, the refusal of accounting students to join the CFC's network of support around the entry exam and the subsequent court challenge ultimately blocked the CFC's first move. The struggle between the CFC and MEC centres on whether professional or academic credentials should be adopted as a

Table 3. Issues and associated actors in the process.

Actor						
	CFC	Accounting schools	MEC	FENECIC	Other professional bodies	OAB
Goals of actors	Having qualified accounting professionals	Maximising student numbers	Following and monitoring the LDB	Become an accredited professional accountant	Having qualified professionals	Maintain the status quo
Obstacle/problem faced	Implementing a professional entry exam	High rates of failure in professional entry exam reduce student numbers	The CFC is interfering with the MEC's responsibilities	Not passing the professional entry exam	No legal endorsement to implement a professional entry exam	External pressure to change the status quo

CFC: Federal Council of Accounting; MEC: Ministry of Education; FENECIC: National Federation of Accounting Students; OAB: Order of Attorneys of Brazil; LDB: National Education Guidelines and Framework Law.

primary basis for entry to the profession. The respective actors attempted to establish a network of support along these two lines. The contradicting nature of the goals of the two groups of actors meant that establishing a strong network of support with an alliance of key actors was exigent.

In what follows, we consider the debates about implementing a professional entry exam through Resolution CFC no. 853/99 and Bill no. 2,485/03. We then discuss the successful re-emergence of the professional entry exam following a major policy shift in Brazil through effective alliances around a network.

CFC's aborted attempt to institutionalise a professional entry exam (1999–2005): resistance of other actors

Fifty years after its creation, the CFC commenced its attempt to establish a network of support for a professional entry exam by problematising the new paradigm of accounting education under Brazil's new LDB (*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação* – National Education Guidelines and Framework Law) of Law no. 9,394 of 1996. These guidelines included a more dynamic and flexible curriculum to replace the minimalist curriculum of the old LDB (Arends-Kuenning, 2009; Bugarim and Oliveira, 2014; Schwartzman, 1998). The new LDB introduced changes to higher education, such as minimum standards for teacher qualifications, research outcomes, teaching on a full-time basis and a professional profile linked to the formation of the regional and national culture. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the MEC had a more centralised administration, and there was no significant collaboration between the MEC and professional bodies (Gomes, 2003). These developments served as an overflowing of the then regulatory framework, which initiated the CFC's move to advocate a new framing. The rationale for the new framing was to improve the quality of accredited professionals by introducing a professional entry exam following the example of the OAB. Advancing this agenda necessitated that the CFC forge alliances with other key actors, such as the MEC and FENECIC, to establish a network of support for the entry exam.

The experience of lawyers was instrumental in the CFC's attempt to introduce a professional entry exam, because the legal profession was the first in Brazil to introduce a professional entry exam. The OAB was established by law in 1930, and Law no. 4,215 of 1963 granted the OAB the authority to implement a professional entry exam, although the exam was not implemented until 1995. Law no. 8,906 of 1994 provided an update to the statute of the OAB and introduced a professional entry exam for lawyers. Since its implementation, the OAB exam has become renowned for its high failure rate of approximately 80 per cent (DSF, 2005a). Some commentators consider it a mechanism to restrict entry of potential lawyers to the Brazilian market (Schwartzman, 1998). From the OAB's experience, legislative backing for the entry exam was a crucial step for the CFC to establish the much-needed network of support.

In July 1999, the CFC issued Resolution CFC no. 853/99 to introduce a professional entry exam for accountants (*Conselho Federal de Contabilidade* (CFC), 2007b) without securing the enrolment of key actors – mainly the MEC and FENECIC. Unlike the OAB, which used the power of law (i.e. Law no. 8906/94) to enforce its exam, the CFC only relied on an internal resolution to establish a professional entry exam. Accountants who were already registered with the CFC before the establishment of the professional entry exam were 'grandfathered' and would not have had to sit an exam to keep their accreditation (World Bank (WB), 2005). The CFC's problematisation underpinning the need to introduce a professional entry exam was that the quality of accounting services needed to be maintained. The premise that non-government-funded accounting schools were offering low-quality accounting programmes gave further impetus to magnify the overflow that underpinned this problematisation (Participant 7). In justifying its claimed prerogative to

create a professional entry exam, the CFC argued that such a measure was within its inspection function as a mechanism for ensuring the quality of services (Resolution CFC no. 853/99).

The CFC's move was bound to raise the concerns of key actors, such as the MEC and FENECIC. The CFC attempted to dissipate resistance in this regard by stating that the number of fines issued by CRCs in Brazil decreased by 61 per cent from 1999 to 2004 (CFC, 2007a) and claiming that the exam fostered awareness among new accounting professionals regarding ethical and regulatory requirements (CFC, 2007b). The CFC also used the results of exams as a feedback tool to contribute to the improvement of accounting education in Brazil (Passos, 2004). The results were stratified, and feedback on individual sections of the exams was provided to schools that had high error rates (DSF, 2005a: 38, 340). However, the MEC was against a professional entry exam on the grounds that professional bodies implementing a professional exam were overlapping with the MEC's responsibilities (Participant 1). The MEC was also of the view that professional bodies should not question a diploma issued by a higher education institution (DSF, 2005a: 38, 332). According to the MEC, the responsibilities of professional bodies should be restricted to checking whether professionals have registered their diplomas issued by authorised higher education institutions (DSF, 2005a: 38, 332). Participant 8 acknowledges this point, stating that there is a grey area:

The MEC has constant friction with professional councils because it is not always easy to separate [. . .] the task of universities under the supervision of the MEC, and the professional registry.

The MEC posed two further arguments that served to weaken the network of support that the CFC sought to establish around a professional entry exam. The first argument was that such an exam may serve as a market protection mechanism for accountants (DSF, 2005b). Indeed, from approximately 150,000 candidates who sat the exam between 2000 and 2004, only one-third passed (CFC, 2007a; DSF, 2005a: 38, 339). The second argument relates to a normative argument raised in the presidential message (leading a veto of Bill no. 2,485 of 2005), which stated that a single exam should not be worth more than several years of higher education. This was a recurring argument, because many did not view a single and circumstantial assessment as the best evaluation system for obtaining professional accreditation (Participants 2 and 5) (DSF, 2005a).

Accounting students of higher education institutions are the other group of actors who had a divided reaction regarding the CFC's move to introduce a professional entry exam. Some students, including the FENECIC, supported the exam (Participants 4, 7 and 11), while other accounting students opposed it. The students opposing the professional entry exam challenged the legitimacy of the CFC by arguing that administering an entry exam falls outside the CFC's scope of regulatory mandate (Participant 11). Therefore, accounting students began filing lawsuits contesting the obligation of sitting for a professional entry exam. The underlying concern of the students was that the CFC could use exams as a mechanism for market protection (Participants 7, 8 and 11). The following quote from Participant 3 depicts the general concern regarding market protection:

The manager, the owner of the program, and those promoting the program are exempt from the obligation to train a good student because the student will have to pass the accreditation exam, and we observe that there are states where such approvals occur at a greater or lesser extent, but we observe states where the approval rate reaches 8 percent of students who graduate. Does this mean that 92 percent of students who graduate from these programs are poor and cannot pass? Or is the concern to protect the market from getting so big that we are creating a funnel for screening candidates who can access the market?

The court challenge against the CFC's 1999 framework for introducing a professional entry exam continued to gain momentum because the CFC failed to form alliances with key actors – that

is, the MEC and students – to establish a strong actor network for a professional entry exam. Thus, the professional entry exam was suspended in April 2005 (Castro, 2017).

Following the court decision, all hopes for the future of the exam became focused on Bill no. 2485 presented before the Senate, because the CFC attempted to have the exam requirement legislated. Bill no. 2485 was proposed in 2003 to address the lack of legal support for a professional entry exam; it proposed changes to the *Accounting Act* with the aim of creating a legal basis for the CFC to establish an accreditation exam. The Senate approved the Bill in November 2005, but the Bill was vetoed via the presidential message (no. 857) of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) in December 2005. Bill no. 2485 was vetoed based on *vício de iniciativa* (articles 61, § 1º, II, a) and c) of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution). That is, any law on the role of the CFC had to come from the executive branch of the government and not the legislature (Participant 9). The CFC attempted several times – without success – to gain support from politicians to have the decision overturned (e.g. Santos, 2006; Santos and Giroto, 2008). However, with the veto, the hope for the professional entry exam ended and the matter stalled until 2010.

A brief explanation of Provisional Laws (*Medidas Provisórias*) and how they work in Brazil is necessary here. As explained by Monteiro (2009), since the adoption of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, the president and bureaucrats from the executive branch have had the power to enact laws through Provisional Laws; these laws later receive ex post approval by the Brazilian Congress. Provisional Laws enable interest groups to work directly with bureaucrats from the executive branch to achieve their goals, thereby bypassing Congress. This strategy is convenient because it enables Congress itself to escape public criticism. Monteiro (2009) explains how the Brazilian political class can benefit from Provisional Laws:

They profit indirectly by serving the private interests of those who act, so as to minimize the costs that economic policy transfers to those groups. In order to do that, private groups manage to move opaquely within the executive and can attenuate or even neutralize the costs that a policy may impose on them. More directly, legislators may get recognition from the positively affected segments of society. The blame for the costs – if they are at all recognized – can always be attributed to the executive by the minority; meanwhile, politicians of the majority can highlight the benefits and to try to take credit for them (p. 61).

Re-emergence of the CFC's professional entry exam (2005–2010): successful enrolment of other actors into the CFC's agenda

After 2005, the CFC pursued a different strategy in its effort to build a network of support for the idea of an entry exam. To realise a successful re-emergence of the professional entry exam, the CFC pursued a co-optation rather than a competition strategy with key actors. The CFC lobbied accounting students and collaborated with accounting schools to secure their involvement in the contemplated network of support for the exam. The CFC strengthened its links with accounting students by providing financial support and bringing students 'into the family' (Participant 10). Since 2007, the CFC has also provided financial support for the improvement of accounting programmes via a scheme called Excellence in Accounting (Bugarim and Oliveira, 2014; Santos and Giroto, 2006), thereby facilitating an alliance with schools. Furthermore, the CFC strengthened its ties with accounting schools by organising IFRS classes and national meetings for accounting lecturers to promote teaching quality and establish an image of expertise in IFRS matters and thus solicit an alliance of actors with the CFC (Arduini et al., 2015; Homero Jr, 2017; Santos, 2008b). As Participant 10 noted by comparing the OAB and CFC's relationships with stakeholders:

They [law schools] are now beginning to appreciate [the OAB accreditation exam] because they know that if [law students] do not pass the OAB accreditation exam, [law schools'] ranks will fall because the OAB has institutionalized itself in a way that frightens schools, which is no different than the CFC. However, it is much more didactic because the CFC offers you courses . . . ; often the courses are free. So, they have [an approach] that the OAB does not have.

The CFC introduced changes by standardising the emblems of local chapters of the CFC/CRC system (Participant 7) and at the same time pursued a co-optation strategy to manage its relationship with the MEC. The MEC started consulting professional bodies in relation to opening new schools (Decree no. 5,773 of 2006). The MEC requested reports from the CFC with respect to reviews of any applications by entities seeking to establish a new accounting school in Brazil (Participants 7 and 8). The fact that this strategy appealed to the MEC and the CFC is understandable, because both actors are concerned with the teaching quality of Brazilian accounting schools. This in turn created an impression that the major actors had a shared goal around which to forge alliances. As Participant 8 explains:

The Council reviews the pedagogical projects of the program, facilities, and faculty [to determine] whether they are reasonable [and] in line with the DCNs, the National Curriculum Framework [Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais].

With the benefit of lessons drawn from its unsuccessful attempt, the CFC regarded actors in the law-making system as crucial for the success of its efforts. Regarding the link in the process, the CFC does not enjoy as much presence in the Brazilian Congress as other professionals, such as medical doctors and lawyers (Participants 7, 8 and 9). With this understanding, the CFC created a specialised parliamentary advisory team in 2001 (Participant 9). After Bill no. 2,485 was vetoed in December 2005, in early 2006, the CFC provided material to Congress arguing that the presidential veto was based on a mistaken opinion (Santos, 2006). In 2008, the president of the São Paulo chapter of the CFC (i.e. CRC-SP) personally invited the president of Brazil to formally open the 18th Brazilian Accounting Congress (Santos and Giroto, 2008). The CFC also invited members of the Brazilian Senate to attend the 18th Brazilian Accounting Congress (Santos, 2008a).

The President of Brazil attending the 18th Brazilian Accounting Congress marked the turning point in the relationship between the CFC and the government (Santos, 2008c). Notably, the last and only time a Brazilian head of state had attended an event organised by professional accountants in Brazil was in 1945 (Agrizzi and Sian, 2015). The Brazilian president's speech in 2008 also shows the positive predisposition of the government towards the CFC initiative:³

As we have seen, the interlocution between the federal government and the accounting class has generated, in recent years, a series of extremely positive results. I would, therefore, urge you to further deepen this dialogue and to continue to put forward your proposals. I am sure that many issues that will be discussed at this Congress will result in significant material for the planning and elaboration of public policies.

From an ANT perspective, the CFC's decision to approach accounting students, accounting schools and the government were all strategies adopted to gather support and redraw the accounting accreditation framework. The timing of the CFC's second move was also crucial to secure the sought-after state support. Brazil's adoption of IFRS as a new reporting system constituted an overflowing of the then accounting regulatory framework. This development generated an opportunity that strengthened the perceived need for a well-regulated accounting profession, thereby proposing a more convincing problematisation to ensure the enrolment of actors in a network of

support. Furthermore, the timing coincided with the state's interest in integrating the Brazilian economy with the international economic architecture. That is, because professional accounting bodies with systems of accreditation are the norm in many countries that have adopted IFRS (WB, 2005), the arrival of the IFRS agenda provided a palatable justification for a system of accreditation exams as an entry criterion for Brazilian accountancy. The new overflow also facilitated the enrolment of other important actors – namely, the WB, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) – into the scene. According to the WB (2013), significant changes were needed if the Brazilian professional entry exam was to meet the International Education Standards (IESs) issued by IFAC's International Accounting Education Standards Board (IAESB).

Indeed, the WB (2013) viewed the CFC's role in the IFRS adoption process as one of the contributions of the CFC to the quality of accounting in Brazil. The IFRS agenda gained prominence in Brazil after 2005. The CPC (*Comitê de Pronunciamentos Contábeis* – Committee of Accounting Pronouncements) was created in 2005 to work on the convergence of Brazilian accounting and international accounting standards. It is responsible for preparing and issuing technical pronouncements on accounting procedures and disclosures that reflect the convergence of Brazilian accounting standards with international accounting standards (Rodrigues et al., 2012). Similarly, in 2006, the BACEN (*Banco Central do Brasil* – Central Bank of Brazil) and, in 2007, the CVM (*Comissão de Valores Mobiliários* – Securities and Exchange Commission of Brazil) announced that procedures for the preparation and publication of financial statements would be implemented (in accordance with international standards) from 2010. The announcements included BACEN no. 014,259 of 10 March 2006 and Instrução CVM 457 of 13 July 2007, and the legal support for adopting IFRS came through the enactment of Law no. 11,638 in 2007.⁴ A memorandum of understanding (MOU) set out the strategy for the completion of the convergence projects and was signed on 28 January 2010 by relevant Brazilian accounting bodies and the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB). The MOU specified that the end of 2010 was the target date for full convergence (Rodrigues et al., 2012). The introduction of the IFRS in Brazil required accountants to improve their accounting knowledge to ensure that it reached an international level (Giroto and Lima, 2010) (Participant 7).

On 27 May 2010, which is Accountant's Day in Brazil, the Brazilian Senate paid homage to the CFC/CRC system, reportedly for the first time in Brazilian history (Giroto, 2010a). One month later, on 11 June 2010, Provisional Law no. 472 was converted into Law no. 12,249 and enacted by the President, thereby legislating the professional credentials of the CFC as the primary basis for entry into the accounting profession. During the review of Provisional Law no. 472, the responsibilities of the CFC were compared with the responsibilities of the OAB (DSF, 2010: 18, 114). Article 76 of Law no. 12,249 changed the *Accounting Act* by creating a legal prerogative for the CFC to implement a professional entry exam. The significance of the changed circumstances in the intervening period is evidenced by the fact that the same president who vetoed Bill no. 2,485 in 2005 enacted Law no. 12,249 in 2010.

A few days after the enactment of Law no. 12,249, a former president of the CFC had an audience with the Brazilian vice president to discuss the success of re-introducing the professional entry exam (Santos, 2010). Furthermore, the president of Brazil attended a ceremony organised by the CFC to thank him (Giroto, 2010b). This proximity to the head of state shows that the CFC had achieved its goal of becoming more engaged with the government. Gaining state support was a crucial strategy that enabled the CFC to have a professional entry exam institutionalised. IFRS adoption and the timing of the CFC's second move (following the GFC) produced an appealing problematisation to persuade the government and secure the involvement of key actors. Furthermore,

the global move for harmonisation in financial reporting facilitated legislative support. This development facilitated the CFC's decision to transform into a full-fledged professional accountancy body with market control privileges. That is, interest in accessing the international capital market for Brazilian businesses following the GFC and increasing foreign direct investment mitigated the potential friction of the type that arose between the CFC and other actors in the CFC's first move to introduce a professional entry exam.

In the process of establishing a link with the state, the professional entry exam discourse also shifted from the more hostile strategy of the CFC, which had directly focused on exclusion in the 1999 framing, to one that was aligned with the societal goal of facilitating economic policy pursuits. The government's policy focus of internationalising the economy and the associated master discourse on the need for a well-developed accounting infrastructure in the globalising economy helped garner the government's support in the CFC's second move.

Conclusion

The actor-based approach to the analysis of accounting professionalisation facilitates an understanding of historically contingent professionalisation processes. It allows a flexible view of the relationships among closure goals, strategies and outcomes of professional projects, which the neo-Weberian view assumes as tightly coupled. Our analysis of the CFC's successful re-introduction of a professional entry exam in 2010 after a failed earlier attempt provides key insights in this respect. It illustrates how a shift in strategy and rationale for entry control yielded a different outcome. That is, the CFC co-opted accounting students and the MEC, which resisted the CFC's earlier attempt, and it reframed its rationale for entry exams around a major socioeconomic agenda of the time. It used the IFRS adoption agenda as a mediating mechanism to facilitate an alliance with the state, consistent with Brazil's desire to integrate into the globalising economy.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study illustrates that occupational groups use transnational issues as leverage to forge an alliance with the state. It brings to light the role of developments in the international environment as an external shock that occupational groups invoke to disrupt existing actor networks and build new networks around key professionalisation goals. In doing so, the study enriches the literature that highlights the explanatory power of ANT in studying accounting professionalisation (Gendron and Barrett, 2004; Mihret et al., 2017). The study enhances our understanding of accounting professionalisation from the ANT perspective by providing insights into the historically contingent nature of the rationales that transnational accounting issues provide to local professional projects. In this regard, Mihret et al. (2017) argue that the Saudi Arabian accounting professionalisation project illustrates how localising accounting standards and expertise vis-à-vis the threat of international dominance served as a rationale to secure state support for the project's realisation of entry controls. In contrast, the Brazilian case emphasises how a local occupational group capitalised on the imperative of international harmonisation of accounting to introduce a control mechanism that restricts entry to professional practice. This implies that the ANT lens enables professionalisation processes to be examined as phenomena situated in socio-economic contexts.

At the empirical level, the Brazilian case shares some similarities with the experiences of other countries in which the state played a significant role in the professionalisation process. It also demonstrates how factors originating from developments outside the national political-economic boundary can be invoked to support occupational groups' goals. In this respect, unlike former colonies that showed an imperial influence in accountancy (Annissette, 2000, 2010), the professionalisation process in Brazil was affected by globalisation rather than an imperial connection. The effect of global developments in accountancy in developing and emerging economies is reflected inter

alia in the role of the IFRS adoption agenda to justify consolidating domestic accounting institutions (Hopper et al., 2017; Mihret and Bobe, 2014).

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Notes

1. Accredited professional accountants who wish to act as independent auditors must take additional technical qualification examinations to become registered. These examinations are administered by the CFC in collaboration with the Brazilian Institute of Independent Auditors and the accredited professional accountants who pass the examinations are registered in the national registry of independent auditors, which is managed by the CFC. These additional examination requirements apply to accredited professional accountants who wish to practice in regulated sectors in which independent audits are required. Such requirements are set by the Brazilian Corporations Law and several regulatory bodies, depending on which regulated sector independent audit is required (see the Report on the Observance of Standards and Codes (ROSC) published by the WB (2013) for a comprehensive discussion about the intricacies).
2. In state corporatist societies, interest groups are granted certain rights and autonomy in return for adopting policies that reflect the interests of the government. In such situations, associations are accessories to the government and serve as an extension of the state bureaucracy.
3. All Brazilian presidents' official speeches are transcribed and available on the Presidential library at <http://www.biblioteca.presidencia.gov.br/presidencia/ex-presidentes/luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva/discursos/2o-mandato/2008>.
4. For a comprehensive discussion of the influences leading to the adoption of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) in Brazil, please see Rodrigues et al. (2012).

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