

PERSPECTIVES

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SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND GRADUATE STUDIES IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION IN BRAZIL: THE ROLE OF EVALUATIONS

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous approaches that relate graduate programs in business administration to social inequality. Generally associated with poverty and concentration of people's wealth (Díaz, 2007), social inequality may be addressed through opportunities of access to master's and Ph.D. courses (Kliksberg, 2010; Murillo, 2007) and studies on social impact on the life of the congresses and community (Kliksberg, 2010). It may also be approached from a diversity standpoint (Sen, 2001), considering ethnic and gender differences, as well as regional disparities in Brazil. In this article, I address the role of the evaluation system of the graduate program in business administration, managed by the Coordination of Superior Level Staff Improvement (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior [CAPES]), in reducing social inequality. In addition to focusing on the debate in my study and research area, examining social inequality from the assessment perspective directs this reflection toward something that affects the entire academic community, enabling dialog with other possible approaches.

The reflection path proposed in this study, which is to be regarded as an opinion article, begins with the presentation of some guiding premises of the debate. Then, I conduct a brief assessment of some aspects of the evaluation of the *stricto sensu* graduate course in business administration. I conclude with implications for the social inequality issue, derived from the dialog between the premises presented in the first part and a brief meta-assessment, conducted in the second part.

GUIDING PREMISES

The following assumptions elucidate the viewpoint of the reflection and lay the foundation for the argumentation.

The first premise is accompanied by a Paulo Freire quote: "If education alone does not transform society, without it society will not change either" (Freire, 2000, p. 31). It is paramount to recognize the role of education in reducing inequality; however, this does not imply that universities should be regarded as ideologically neutral institutions or as ideological apparatuses of the state, focused on reproducing inequality. The graduate programs in business administration play a key role in reducing inequality, but they cannot change the world by themselves.

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The second premise recognizes the importance of knowing which graduate course in business administration is required. In other words: “Masters and PhDs, what for?” (Patrus & Lima, 2014, p. 6). This question must be asked both within the framework of each program and in the area of business administration. My answer, shared by many colleagues, is clear: we want a program that develops individuals with teaching and research skills in business administration, and the skill of educating others as individuals. In the German sense of *bildung*, the purpose of pursuing a master or doctor is to develop a professional and academic life, which is much different from the term “preparation,” suggested in Article 66 of the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (1996).

According to Kant, a well-educated person has clarification, namely, human beings’ emergence from their self-incurred minority, which is their inability to make use of their understanding without guidance from another individual (Kant, [1783] 2005). The third premise considers that the attainment of a master’s or doctorate requires individuals to be able to confidently think for themselves, that is, to be enlightened, have good judgement, be the author of their own understanding, and think independently.

As a corollary of the previous premise, the permanent faculty of a graduate course program (hereafter GCP) must be “illuminated”; in other words, individuals must be able to think for themselves and make public use of their reasoning in all domains. Therefore, a GCP must have clear training objectives for itself and the public. I was once flabbergasted by the discussion of a program coordinator about the purpose of masters and PhD. courses in a congress. She told me that the purpose of her course was determined by the CAPES in its evaluation policy. Her entire management was guided by the CAPES evaluation criteria, despite her not agreeing with its productivist logic; this illustrates Kant’s concept of minority. As a counterexample, I quote the metaphoric question posed by Tânia Fischer to the Interdisciplinary Center for Development and Social Management students: “How many lives has your project saved or is saving?” (Fischer, 2018, p. 18). This is the clear purpose of vocational training, thought of in an illuminated, liberated way, according to an education ideal. The fourth premise states the need for a GCP to have a clear proposal of what professional it wants to form and it must be appropriately supported by the curriculum, the teaching body, the physical and technological infrastructure, and the preconditions for student graduation. Thus, in my opinion, pursuing a good evaluation from the CAPES is consistent with having a purpose that will inspire the GCP.

As a fifth premise, I point out the necessary link between evaluation and educational objectives. An evaluation is logical

when the teaching-learning process promotes the behavioral changes proposed in the educational objectives (Pilletti, 1987). Thus, its formative character allows systematic improvement of the means, processes, and methods that aim to achieve the educational objectives.

As a sixth and final premise, the inducer power of an evaluation must be acknowledged. On the one hand, it can substantially promote the pursuit of educational objectives. However, to achieve this, it must be ensured that the assessment criteria are evaluated *ex-ante*, that is, the assessment criteria should be established before the four-year evaluation period to plan for their fulfillment. If certain CAPES assessment criteria are established *ex-post* (after the four-year period), they damage their inducing character, potentially favoring the manipulation of criteria to favor one or another program. On the other hand, the unintentional consequences generated from the evaluation (Smith, 1995) include “tunnel vision” (to prioritize quantifiable indices to the detriment of those with greater difficulty of quantification), “misrepresentation” (perverse behavior that disobey procedures or manipulate data to search for a better evaluation), and “fixation to a measure” (to take an index as more important than its underlying objective).

Having established the six premises that form the basis of this argumentation, I provide a brief assessment of some aspects of the CAPES evaluation to investigate whether they contribute to reducing social inequality.

A BRIEF ASSESSMENT OF THE CAPES EVALUATION

The CAPES was established in 1951 with the mission to improve the qualifications of higher education teachers and researchers. The turning point in the history of CAPES began in 1998, when the evaluation model, previously based on visits from consultant commissions and follow-ups to improve courses, with grades between 1 and 5, was altered, and now it features grades between 1 and 7. This new model has introduced the social inclusion and internationalization criterion in the evaluation, shifting the focus from teaching to research (Souza, 2008). I first address the changes that the CAPES evaluation underwent and then discuss social inclusion, an issue more related to the social inequality subject.

As mentioned in a previous study (Patrus, Shigaki, & Dantas, 2018), the new evaluation structure of CAPES, despite classifying the programs between grades 1 and 7, maintained the evaluation scale between 1 and 5 for all criteria. The programs evaluated with grade 5 are then re-evaluated to select those

with concepts 6 and 7. However, there is a major distortion in this double evaluation of the CAPES evaluation system: only the programs that have excellence are applicable for grades 6 and 7, namely, the programs with average grades greater than 4.5 out of 5. The expected normal curve of course distribution is only verified among the grades from 1 to 5. Correcting such a distortion implies changing the entire platform supporting the evaluation. This demands investments in not only information technology but also the entire classification logic.

The consequence of this misunderstanding, combined with the minority of coordination of some programs, fosters isomorphism among the graduate courses, which is a progressive search for legitimacy through actions imitating the pattern of programs graded 5, 6, or 7. In a diverse and unstable country, the evaluation follows a single pattern, without considering the specific vocations of each program and its regional location. Similarly, the purposes of GCPs appear to be dictated not by the enlightenment and discernment of each program in each region, but by the search for the legitimacy of a grade given by a regulatory or promoting body. It is worth highlighting that the responsibility for this mimetic isomorphism does not lie only with the institutional power of the evaluation, but must also be shared with the lack of clarification (as defined in premises three and four) regarding the coordination of programs that depend on institutional evaluations.

One of the causes of this dependence is the competitive character of the CAPES evaluation, whose purpose seems to violate the premise that deems the evaluation an integrated process of verifying the achievement of educational objectives (premise five). More than an evaluation to investigate quality and guide improvements, the CAPES evaluation is an additive assessment because it chooses programs that can obtain resources and grants from public organs. As publicly stated on more than one occasion by the former assistant coordinator of the Business Administration area at CAPES, Professor Aridelmo Teixeira, the CAPES evaluation aims to classify programs for the allocation of scarce resources. The evaluation “is like a Brazilian championship, used to classify some for the Libertadores Cup, others for the South American Cup, and to demote others to Second Level Division” (Patrus, Tolentino, & Shigaki, 2018, p. 7).

The introduction of the calculation of a median to evaluate the qualified production of the business management area in the previous four-year evaluation period confirms the understanding that the evaluation system has classification objectives for resource distribution. According to the area document of the 2017 four-year evaluation (CAPES, 2017), the proportion of permanent GCP teachers, which reached the median of qualified academic works in the field, was calculated based on the scores achieved

by their publications in the best scientific journals. The number of teachers who had scores equal to or greater than the median of the area was counted. The total was divided by the total of number of permanent GCP teachers (CAPES, 2017). This criterion perverts the formative purpose of an evaluation by using an *ex-post* criterion, as previously described in premise six, compromising its inducing power. Since the information of what the median of the production of the area is can only be known during the four-year evaluation period, the GCP does not have parameters to establish a goal for its strategic planning. Thus, the competitive aspect of this evaluation criterion can be confirmed.

Regarding the distribution of teachers who have scores equal to or greater than the median of the area, if the number of the teachers who achieved this score is divided by the number of teachers of the permanent faculty, the rule suggests that all teachers should produce international quality (the great majority of the Pages A1 and A2). The median, a measure of academic production, generated what Patrus, Tolentino and Shigaki (2018) called “pre-internationalization”, aims for the internationalization of grade 5, which used to be a differential attribute of the programs graded 6 and 7.

This historical datum suggests how the CAPES established grades 6 and 7, without the necessary adjustment of the grades used in the evaluation. The grades remained between 1 and 5, and were associated with the increase in the measure scale in this model, narrowing the possibility of diversity; this is viewed as isomorphic pressure. Finally, I discuss social inclusion.

Among the components of the CAPES evaluation, social inclusion has the closest relation to the social inequality issue. Unlike the grades of discourses and intellectual production, accounting for 70% of the evaluation and featuring several quantitative metrics, social inclusion is predominantly qualitative: it accounts for 10% of the evaluation. It is composed of three verification items: 1) inclusion and regional and/or national impact of the program; 2) integration and cooperation with other programs and centers; and 3) visibility or transparency of the program.

The first item accounts for 50% of the component, evaluating educational, social, cultural, and technological impacts. The second item accounts for 25% of the component, focusing on actions such as systematic cooperation and exchange with other programs and contribution to innovation in research. The third item, also accounting for 25% of the component, evaluates the availability and accessibility of a program website, with all the data from the program, and broad access to theses and dissertations.

From this data, I conclude that the social inclusion component of a program is evaluated marginally. It is not translated

into values significant enough to induce program coordinators to take this initiative. Notably, Interinstitutional Doctorate (Dinter) and Interinstitutional Masters (Minter) are great initiatives to reduce inequality. Taking the quality of promotion programs to the receiving institutions helps in contributing to the formation of teachers and researchers outside the consolidated centers of education and research, as well as fostering partnerships and opportunities for development in science and technology.

On the one hand, if the promotion programs had to be graded 5, the recent change in this requirement to a minimum of grade 4 should be celebrated as a crucial step toward extending the provision of these partnerships. On the other hand, dedication of time and energy for promotion programs initiatives infringes upon other permanent teachers' tasks. The number of teachers' advisees increases. The fatigue from commuting and duration of trips to the receiving institution, usually in regions where transport logistics are not simple, are other factors that overburden teachers with work.

A way of minimizing these difficulties is to view GCP from a permanent faculty perspective. Because teachers' tasks are multiple and conflicting (Nascimento, 2010), it is not possible that every faculty member completes every task assigned to him or her. When considering teachers as members of a faculty, each teacher may theoretically contribute to the program with his or her best skills, whether they are in education, research, or management. The program must handle its purpose and institutional requirements, with a leader capable of integrating each of its members and function as a healthy organism. Requesting that all teachers take care of all these tasks not only undermines the concept of faculty, but it may take a toll on teachers' health. Moreover, although CAPES evaluates the program and not its teachers, the institutions use the same criteria as those used to evaluate the program, to re-accredit or disaccredit its permanent teachers.

A new, unintentional consequence of the evaluation lies therein; however, it is not highlighted by Smith (1995) or by Thiel and Leeuw (2002). I propose to call it an intellectual solipsism, which may be defined as an emphasis on evaluating the individual productivity of the professional, without considering his or her contribution to his or her team. Considering the context of *stricto sensu* graduate programs, the intellectual solipsism of a GCP professor, regarded as academic solipsism, refers to the emphasis on evaluating his or her individual productivity. This also takes into account the fact that teachers can belong to a permanent faculty group, and may contribute several skills that their peers may not be equipped with, which is required for collectivity to function in good terms.

FINAL REMARKS

With the aim of analyzing social inequality based on the evaluation of the business management programs created by CAPES, I present the following four final remarks: First, it must be acknowledged that the CAPES evaluation includes initiatives to reduce inequality. Regarding social inclusion, there are clear behaviors that are expected from a program to promote social, educational, cultural, economic, and technological development. The strong point of these initiatives is Dinter and Minter; if there is interest from the programs and the area, a greater incentive may be given to joining partnerships like Dinter and Minter, provided that the *tradeoff* is reasonable. Tackling this proposal renews the recommendation that the business administration area and each of its programs reflect on what kind of graduate course one is seeking, which is the point of the second premise.

Second, the enhancement of social inclusion may easily lose value because of the unintentional consequences of the evaluation, especially tunnel vision. This occurs when a program tends to prioritize indicators with quantifiable metrics to the detriment of those of qualitative evaluation. The multiplicity of metrics in the current evaluation, despite enabling greater objectivity, incurs the risk of fixation to the scale, or the risk of GCPs prioritizing an index over its underlying objective.

Third, to fight social inequality is to fight for the right to equality; however, it is essential to remember the importance of fighting for the right to difference (Cury, 2002). The CAPES evaluation treats different people in the same way; the diverse programs try to be equal. An unintentional consequence of GCP evaluations is the issue broadly referred to as intellectual solipsism, and more specifically, academic solipsism: teachers, who have different skills, are evaluated by the university on a scale, and teachers, whose skills are different, try to acquire the same skills. As demonstrated, this distortion undermines the significance of permanent faculty, a fundamental concept that converts team diversity into a value.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that there is a complexity to these challenges. Only by publicly exercising understanding, seeking dialog in a debate focused on the desired graduate course, for Brazil and for each of the GCPs, it is possible to create programs that can contribute to a less unequal, fairer country. As researcher professors, we do not have the power to transform the reality of inequality in Brazil, but if critical reflection, dialog, and rationality are not promoted within the academic community, there is no possibility of transformation.

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