

Education and Professional Activity in Social Work

On April 24, 2007, the government of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) launched the Education Development Plan (PDE), as part of the Program for Accelerated Growth (PAC). The PDE has been materialized through a set of decrees, laws, resolutions and executive orders that structure the university counter-reform that is underway. To understand this proposal, it is necessary to look at some historical information concerning higher education in Brazil in the past three decades.

In the mid-1980s, during the government of President José Sarney (1985-1990), an executive group was created for the Reformulation of Higher Education (Geres), which among other objectives, took a position against the then current model of higher education that was based on the inseparability between teaching, research and extension, and later defended in the Law for Educational Guidelines and Bases (LDB, 1996). This group was disbanded, at the time, given the reaction of organized social segments that were committed to universities that are public, free, offer classroom courses, secular and socially oriented.

In the government of President Fernando Collor de Mello (1990-1992), however, an attack was consolidated on what came to be called the “single university model,” in favor of a need for diversification, made explicit in the idea of the “Teaching University.” In the following government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), this concept was operationalized through the action of the Ministry of Education (MEC): to “expand the public higher education system by improving institutional resources for the existing models” (Planejamento Político-estratégico 1995/1998 – MEC, 1995, p. 26). These proposals were based on World Bank guidelines for higher education “reform” in developing countries.

Based on this, the flexibilization of the principle of the inseparability between teaching, research and extension came to ostensibly integrate the agenda of higher education public policies, through a

flexibilization that was materialized in parameters such as sequential courses, distance education, and basic cycles. These, in turn, sustained initiatives like the creation of the Open University of Brazil and the New University. These initiatives involved three realms: public classroom education, private classroom education and public and private distance education.

Concerning public education, this concept of flexibilization was incorporated to the PDE in the Lula government, and was emphasized in the Plan for the Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities (Reuni). The main objectives of Reuni are to avoid precocious and limited professionalization by introducing cycles or levels of education, reducing the number of dropouts and increasing enrollment, doubling the number of students entering higher education courses. All of this, however, was done without a proportional increase in funding for universities, and consequently, in the number of teachers.

Equally grave is the process of privatization and commercialization of higher education, with an expansion, without criteria, in the number of private schools in various regions. In the specific case of Social Work, in 1998, there were 89 Social Work schools recognized by MEC. According to data of the National Institute of Educational Study and Research (INEP/MEC), this number rose to 111, in 2002, and to 567, in July 2012. That is, from 1998 to 2012, there was more than 500% growth in the number of Social Work schools offered in the country, without confirming the conditions of the operational and teaching infrastructure at these schools.

The EAD, in turn, had been presented by MEC as an instrument capable of guaranteeing and expanding access of the population to higher education and thus attaining *social responsibility*. According to the MEC site, in 2010, Brazil had 189 institutions accredited to offer distance education, each one with its respective centers. The cost-benefit ratio has resulted in growing adhesion of private institutions to this mode of education. Thus, criticisms of EAD extend to all and any precarious

form of professional education, whether in a classroom or not, public or private.

Based on this information, it is noted that the proposals found in the “counter-reform” for higher education enacted since the Lula government, interfere directly in the implementation of the Curricular Guidelines for Social Work schools. The PAC, and within it, the PDE, do not provide new resources: both intend to achieve their objectives by a redistribution of emphases and by providing incentives to actions in public-private partnerships (PPP), governed by law n. 11.079/2004. According to this legislation, the public sector can invest in the private sector and the private in the public, and some services, whether or not they are offered directly by the State, come to be considered public – including, education. Since they are considered *public*, they can receive State funds.

In addition to this ambiguous relationship between the public and the private, the intention was identified to strengthen the division between teaching universities and research universities. There would be a smaller number of research universities, which require higher investments and a qualified teaching body with exclusive dedication, according to the government proposal. They would be the so-called “centers of excellence,” aimed at attending the interests of the market under the terms of the Law for Technological Innovation. Meanwhile, the teaching universities would be slimmed down instruments for professionalization, with shorter courses, without an environment for academic research. These types of schools already existed in the private sector, but some federal campuses are being transformed into this model of institution.

The justification for this policy is the undeniable need to democratize access to higher education, which is also defended by the teaching movement. Nevertheless, we do not want “poor education for the poor,” to prepare the citizen worker for a society of unemployment, instituted by capital. This policy affects our project for professional education, raising new configurations both for the education of social workers and for the exercise of the profession. It interferes directly in the profile of the professional that we want to educate, *for what and for whom to educate*, offering advantages only for market interests. Thus, this once again places at risk the defense of the inseparability between teaching, research and extension at the universities, present in the Curricular Guidelines, a principle that, as we indicated earlier, has been brutally attacked by recent government proposals for higher education.

Research is a constitutive part of professional activity and therefore of education; and cannot be an occasional activity, because it is inherent to the process of professional education. Associated to the research

activity, there is also extension, with both considered to be “complementary activities” to basic educational activities. These activities cannot assume the merely commercial character of providing services or selling products, and their objective must be teaching and the approximation of universities to society, and of knowledge to reality.

The direct consequences of this government policy also fall on the activity of the required internship. Social Work has been striving to halt this increased weakening, by approving two instruments of struggle for the category in support of quality higher education: Resolution 533 of Cfess, of Sept. 29, 2008, which regulates the Direct Supervision of Internships, and establishes norms for the number of students per field supervisor, and the National Internship Policy, prepared by the Brazilian Association of Research and Education in Social Work (Abepss) and approved by the category in 2010.

Given this situation, it is essential to socialize and deepen the debate about “Education and Professional Activity in Social Work”. This issue of *Revista Katálisis* aims to fulfill this role, presenting articles that contribute to this discussion in the different realms of education: undergraduate, graduate and permanent. The issue is thus an appeal for everyone’s participation in the defense of public universities in Brazil.

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