

THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO EDUCATION SPENDING IN BRAZIL (*)

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Among several high-impact measures affecting education during Jair Bolsonaro's first year in office, there were severe budget cuts and incentives to the procurement of private financial support for federal public universities. While these measures may be part of a more systematic attack on academic and cultural institutions and science, they are often justified on the assumption that there is excessive spending in university institutions, which would deprive basic education of essential resources.

Such rationale, however, is not supported by empirical data. Brazil's spending in university education is well below OCDE's average, ranking 16th among 31 countries included in the 2018 edition of the organization's global survey (Figure 1). At the same time, Brazil has one of the lowest rates of youth enrollment in higher education, even when compared to similar developing countries.

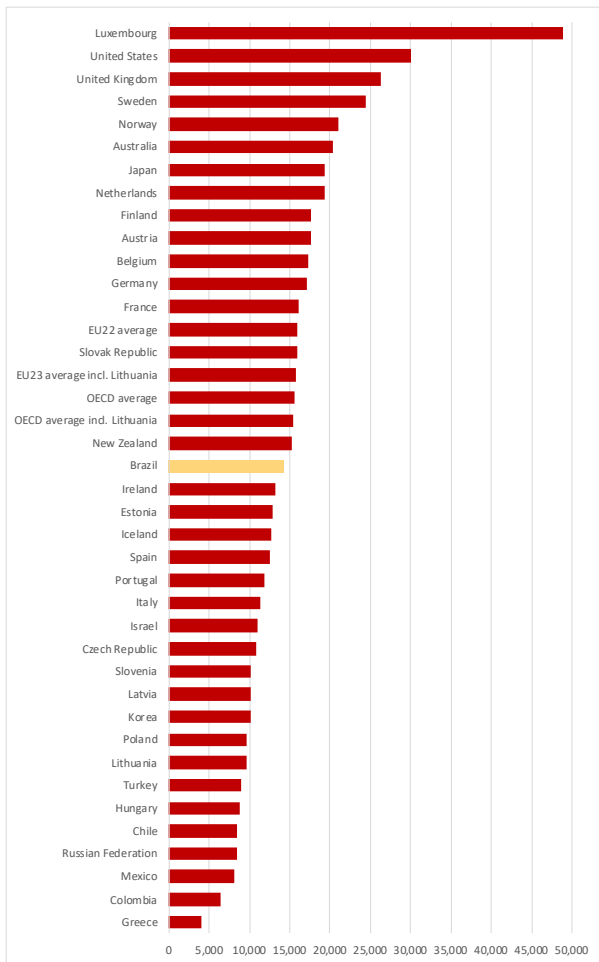


Figure 1. Public spending per pupil in higher education (2016) US\$ PPP. Source: OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2018.

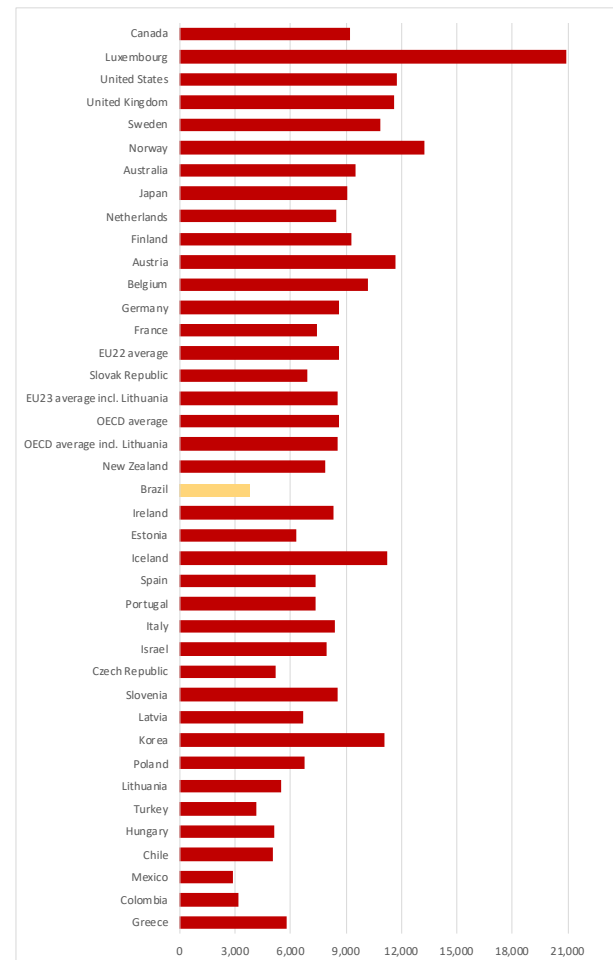


Figure 2. Public spending per pupil in primary and secondary education (2016) US\$ PPP. Source: OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2018.

The Brazilian budget for basic education is, indeed, extremely low. Hovering below a US\$ 4,000 yearly



spending per pupil, Brazil's spending on basic education is one of the lowest among the countries considered – much below the average in the European Union or in OECD countries (Figure 2). Nevertheless, looking at the evolution of educational spending over the 21st century, one can see that between 2005 and 2015, Brazil expanded dramatically its spending from 4.5% to 6.2% of its GDP (Figure 3). That represents a 38% increase over one decade, an unparalleled boost among the countries considered in the OCDE survey.

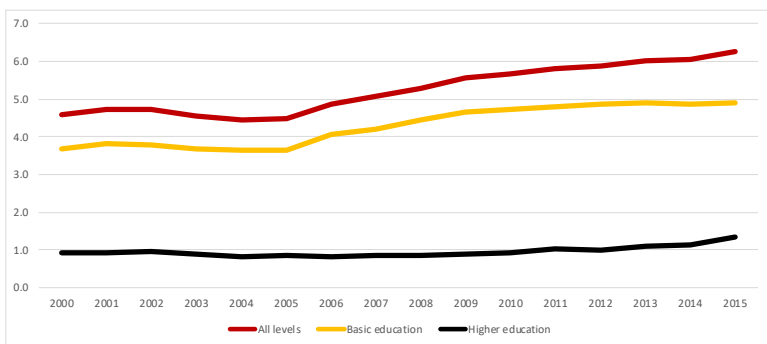


Figure 3. Public spending in education as a percentage of GDP. Source: Brazilian Ministry of Education, Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Studies and Research on Education (MEC/INEP)

Furthermore, this expansion affected all levels of education, but favored basic education much more than university education, thus reducing the disparities in expenditures between these two levels. Finally, the numbers on total spending on both levels show that approximately 80% of the investment in education focuses on basic education. This means that even an aggressive transfer of resources from university to basic education would disrupt the former, but would be of little help to the latter.

A longitudinal analysis of per pupil spending in each level also tells a different story than what the Bolsonaro administration contends. In 2015 per pupil spending was R\$ 6,381 (~US\$ 1,188) in basic education and R\$ 23,215 (~4,322) in public universities, that is, 3.6 times more than the former.

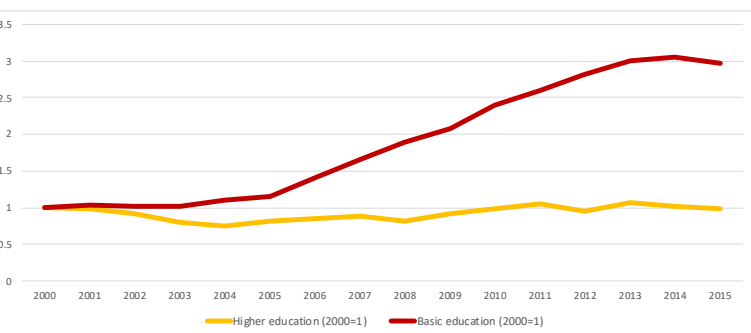


Figure 4. Evolution of per pupil spending in higher and basic education (2000=1). Source: Brazilian Ministry of Education, Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Studies and Research on Education (MEC/INEP)

However, this disparity had been much larger and has systematically decreased over the last decade with the increase of public spending in basic education. From 2005 to 2015, the amount spent with each student was increased in every educational level⁽¹⁾. Still, the expansion focused primarily in the improvement of basic education rather than university education: taking per pupil spending in the year 2000 as a baseline, the amount spent per capita in basic education almost tripled, while the amount spent per student in university remained stable (Figure 4).

This does not mean that there has not been an increase in the investment in higher education, but this increase was part of the effort to offer more spots at this level, keeping per pupil spending stable. Finally, it should be noted that per pupil spending at the university level also funds research and outreach activities. More than 90% of the scientific production, research, and development in Brazil originate in Federal Institutions of Higher Education (*Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior* or IFES).

Despite the challenges posed by the economic and political crises Brazil has faced since 2015, it must continue to seek this same integrative approach to education spending. Public spending in universities cannot be considered excessive if it still falls short of fulfilling the need for further expansion in this domain of the educational system. The disparities in expenditure between basic and higher education should be corrected by increasing the investment in the former rather than stifling the latter.

Notes

^(*) Original submission in Portuguese; translation by Leticia Galizzi

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⁽¹⁾ Increased spending was possible as a result of economic growth, which allowed for greater tax revenue and an increased educational budget, first with the creation of the National Fund for the Development of Basic Education (FUNDEB) and then with the determination that education be considered mandatory public spending. The economic crisis of 2015 affected per pupil spending, but public spending as a percentage of the GDP remained constant.

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