Public Higher Education in Brazil: A State Policy?

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Background/Significance

Unlike countries such as the United States, where higher education has been consolidated for centuries, the university in Brazil is a relatively recent institution. The first university was created in 1920, and the expansion of the network of federal universities occurred in a discontinuous manner. Despite significant advances over the last two decades, territorial coverage and access rates to higher education remain below the levels observed in OECD countries (OECD, 2023).

In addition to being limited, the availability of seats in federal public universities is predominantly concentrated in major urban centers. According to data from Inep, in 2022 only 284 of Brazil's 5,570 municipalities recorded enrollments in on-campus undergraduate programs at federal universities. This represents territorial coverage of only 5.1%.

Even when considering the supply of undergraduate programs across all higher education institutions (HEIs) in Brazil, regardless of academic organization or administrative dependency, the data show a deficit in available seats. In other words, the provision of higher education in Brazil started late and has advanced only modestly.

According to Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl (2013), the development of public policy involves a cycle of five stages. The process begins with agenda setting, when a social issue becomes recognized as a public problem. After recognition, policy formulation begins, involving debate over alternatives. The third stage is decision-making, in which one option is approved. This process is political rather than technical. Once defined, policy implementation begins, which is crucial for success. Finally, public policy evaluation examines impacts and necessary adjustments.

One of the challenges associated with policies specifically aimed at expanding public higher education concerns the difficulty of ensuring continuity in implementation over time. Educational policies have long and complex political and administrative life cycles and therefore need to be recognized as state policies, as they should not be replaced or undergo significant alterations at each transition in federal executive leadership. Non-adherence to this principle undermines the effective implementation of established policy.

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Research Question

How does the alternation of power in the Brazilian federal executive branch affect the budgetary stability of federal public universities, and what are the implications for the consolidation of higher education expansion policy?

Data Sources

This study uses official data from the Integrated Planning and Budget System (Siop), made available through the panel Financing of Science, Technology, and Public Higher Education (SoU_Ciência, 2022). The analysis covers liquidated expenditures of the 69 federal universities between 2000 and 2023, adjusted by the IPCA/IBGE, including four main expenditure categories (GND):

GND1 – Personnel and social charges;
GND3 – Other current expenses (maintenance and operations);
GND3 – Other current expenses (student assistance);
GND4 – Investments (infrastructure and assets).

Methods

This is an exploratory and documentary study, with a deductive approach and longitudinal design, grounded in literature review (Howlett, Ramesh & Perl, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2021) and analysis of secondary data.

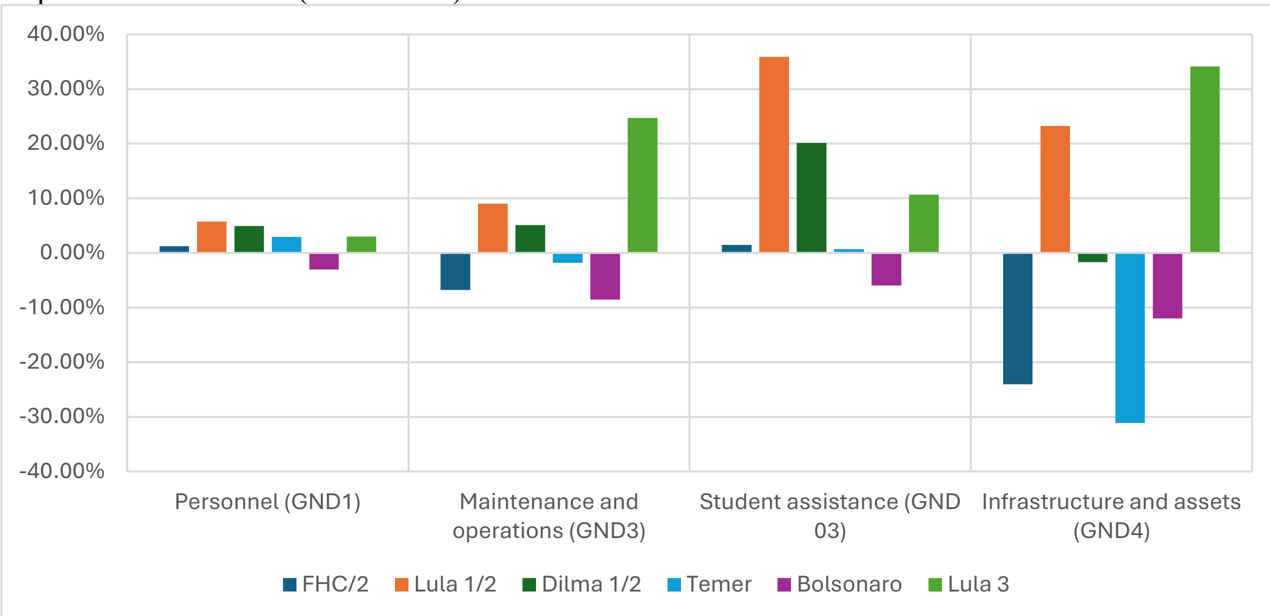
The option for liquidated expenditures is since they reflect goods and services effectively delivered to the public sector, unlike commitments, which can be reversed during the fiscal year, or payments, which may occur in a later period.

The analysis considers expenditure variation in each GND across six government cycles (2000–2023), allowing us to observe to what extent changes in federal executive leadership have influenced the budgetary policies of federal universities.

Findings

The results show that higher education financing policy in Brazil is strongly impacted by changes in the group holding executive power at the federal level.

Table 1 – Summary of Annual Percentage Variations by GND of Federal Universities' Expenditures in Brazil (2000–2023)



It is observed that during the Lula 1/2 administrations the greatest expansion occurred across all categories, with emphasis on the growth of student assistance (+35.87% per year) and infrastructure and assets (+23.26% per year). In the Dilma 1/2 administrations, there was growth in average expenditures on personnel (+4.94% per year), other current expenses (+5.08% per year), and student assistance (+20.12% per year), while expenditures on infrastructure and assets showed contraction (-1.70% per year).

The Temer administration marked a turning point in federal university spending, with sharp contraction in infrastructure and assets (-31.13% per year) and a significant decline in other current expenses (-1.83% per year). During the Bolsonaro administration, the retrenchment continued, especially in other current expenses (-8.52% per year), student assistance (-5.98% per year), and infrastructure and assets (-11.59% per year).

Finally, at the beginning of the Lula 3 administration, there is evidence of a partial recovery in all categories, with emphasis on infrastructure and assets (+34.13% per year), although still insufficient to offset the losses accumulated over the previous decade.

These results reinforce the interpretation that political cycles decisively influence the budgetary policies of federal universities, with periods of expansion associated with more developmentalist governments and strong contractions linked to governments with less social concern.

In this sense, it is reaffirmed that investment in higher education must be conceived as a state policy. Nevertheless, Brazil has yet to consolidate a legal framework capable of guaranteeing and protecting the budgets of its Federal Institutions of Higher Education. This normative gap leaves universities at the mercy of the ideological convictions of the political group in power every four years. In a world increasingly driven by disbelief in facts and the rise of new "regimes of truth" based on beliefs rather than evidence, this is particularly dangerous, not only in Brazil.

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