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By Marion Lloyd
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Paulo Speller is not afraid of a good challenge. As a student leader in the 1960s, he was tortured and jailed for more than a year under Brazil’s military dictatorship. After regaining his freedom, he went into exile in Mexico, which, despite waging its own “dirty war” against leftist groups, gave asylum to thousands of exiles from authoritarian regimes in other parts of Latin America. During his eight years in the country, Speller earned a bachelor’s degree at the Universidad Veracruzana and a master’s degree in psychology at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, where he also taught. It was a time of profound change at the university—and in Mexico.

After spending two years in Mozambique as an UNESCO volunteer, Speller availed of the 1979 Brazilian Amnesty Law to return home for several years. He later earned a Ph.D. in Government from the University of Essex, in England, before returning as an administrator and then president of the Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso, a public institution in the Brazilian outback. In 2010, he became the founding president of the Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira, in the state of Ceará. The institution, located in the impoverished Northeastern region of Brazil, is part of efforts by former President Lula da Silva to strengthen ties with other former Portuguese colonies, and with developing countries in general.

Speller took up his post at the Brazilian Education Ministry at a particularly high-profile moment for the country’s higher education system. In 2011, the federal government announced plans to send 100,000 undergraduate and graduate students to study
science, technology, engineering and math (the so-called STEM fields) at top-ranked foreign universities by 2015. The Brazilian Science Mobility Program, which was previously called Science without Borders and which is by far the largest of its kind in Latin America, seized the attention of universities throughout the world. Speller now fields weekly visits by high-ranking foreign officials from many countries, who hope to attract Brazilian students. As of last fall, more than 54,000 students had gone abroad to more than 30 countries, with the largest share studying in the United States.

Speller is also overseeing the implementation of the most ambitious affirmative action policies in the hemisphere. The new Quota Law, signed by President Dilma Rousseff in August 2012, requires the country’s 63 federal universities—which are among the most competitive and prestigious—to reserve half of their spots for Afro-Brazilians, members of indigenous groups, and low-income graduates of public high schools, by 2016. The law institutionalizes decades of affirmative action policies in Brazilian higher education, which have benefitted more than 1 million members of traditionally disadvantaged groups.

A third milestone for Brazilian higher education is a new federal law approved in August, which earmarks 75 percent of royalties and other fees derived from oil exploration, for use in public education. The government estimates that Law 12858 will inject an additional US$51 billion into the education system by 2022.

I spoke with Speller during the Third Congress of the Americas on International Education, held recently in the Mexican city of Monterrey. He was optimistic that the new policies would help to democratize Brazilian higher education, while also increasing the country’s scientific and technological capacities. Speller was also frank about the major challenges facing the country’s education system as a whole.

**How are things going with the Brazilian Science Mobility Program?**
The program is going really well. We had to make some necessary adjustments, in the case of Portugal, for example. There was a huge demand to study in Portugal, and we eliminated the country from the list of options for students enrolled in undergraduate sandwich programs. There were 30,000 signed up to go, and the idea is that the students have the opportunity not only to live in another country, but also to develop fluency in another language, in particular—although not exclusively—in English. We realized that a large number of students did not have the necessary fluency in English, so we created a new program called English without Borders, which is currently operating in all, or virtually all, the federal universities. There are 63 federal universities, including the four that were recently created.

The program has three components. The first is an English test, which is mandatory for all students who want to go abroad. We also have a distance education program and
another which is offered on campus. The results of all three have been fantastic. Everyone wants to take advantage of the programs, including professors and university functionaries. In addition, we created an alternative for students to undergo three or six months of intensive English-language study at the [foreign] universities where they plan to enroll. So with these important adjustments, I think the program is going very well. Our goal is to offer scholarships to 101,000 students and professors.

**When did the program start exactly?**
We started in 2011, which is very recent. And it ends in 2015.

**Is that a firm deadline?**
For this program in particular, it is. Brazil already has a series of programs for doctoral studies, post-docs, etc., albeit on a much smaller scale. We are now are preparing to take stock of the results, and of course we don’t plan to just end the whole thing. Various components will continue, although maybe in a different form.

**What percent are studying in the United States?**
The largest share. There is a long tradition of [Brazilian] students going to the United States to undergo postgraduate studies, in particular Ph.D.’s. We won’t be sending any more to study at the master’s level, but we are going to start sending students to undergo professional masters, a model that is particularly well-established in the United States. We’re going to start with the United States, which offers one- or two-year programs, or a year and a half at most, but which are not academic masters. They’re for people who work in industry, or people affiliated with universities, but who are working on technological development or engineering.

You may have heard that the Science Mobility Program is targeting the so-called hard areas. Humanities aren’t included. The existing programs for the humanities will continue, but we’re prioritizing the hard sciences.

**The program has attracted a lot of attention for its sheer size. But how much can it really change the face of higher education in Brazil? How significant do you think the impact will be, beyond the numbers?**
It should have a very big impact. Brazilian higher education is currently very classroom-centered. But what we’ve observed in the top-ranked universities in the world are ever greater incentives for students to work individually and independently, with minimal guidance from professors. This is a very important difference.
Right now, we’re working to reintegrate the returning students on campus. In a few places, we’ve found resistance from program coordinators who don’t want to give credit for courses. We need to adopt a much more flexible view of the academic experience abroad. That’s particularly true in areas such as medicine, where the curriculum is very
rigid. And obviously, if the students stray from the established sequence, when they return home, they are told “you need to do this or that.” But we’re talking about small adjustments.

This type of effect is very positive, because the goal is to make the universities more flexible, taking advantage of tools such as information technology. Above all, we’re trying to encourage the students to work independently, under the guidance and supervision of the professor, of course. So this is an element that I find particularly important.

There was a time, a while ago, when you sent many students abroad. It was during the military regime, no?
Yes, that was true before, because the postgraduate system in Brazil only started to take shape in the 1950s, and particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. Starting then, a large number of students were sent abroad, particularly to the United States and Europe. I did my Ph.D. in England at a time when that was an option for large numbers of students. I had a scholarship for four years. This was no longer possible, at least on such a large scale, in the years before the Brazilian Science Mobility Program. Why? Because by then, the postgraduate programs had become well established in Brazil. That was particularly true of the master’s programs, and now we have doctoral programs in practically all areas. Thus the decision to prioritize programs that don’t currently exist in Brazil. But we are revisiting that policy, because the benefits [of study abroad] are well-known, so even if we don’t send students for an entire Ph.D. program, at least they can go abroad as part of a sandwich format. We are trying to promote international exposure, which is incredibly important.

It seems that half the scholarships awarded by the Science Mobility Program are paid for by the private sector.
No, in reality it’s a much smaller number. The total number we anticipate receiving [from the private sector] is 26,000. But that number may end up considerably higher than 26,000, because they [the companies] are really interested and it’s good business for them. In the end, [the scholarships] have a direct, positive impact on their investments, their businesses and their profits.

How does the system work?
They finance the scholarships directly.

Are the students then required to work for the company?
No, it doesn’t even mean that they will go work for a private company, nor that they will necessarily do an internship at one of the companies. [The students] undergo the same selection process. They only need to be enrolled in participating universities, to be
selected, and to be able to speak English. And then they determine their own lives. 
There is no connection between one thing and the other.

**How will the new law on oil royalties affect higher education?**
It’s a ton of money. And now with the approval of the National Education Plan, 
education spending will be fixed at 10 percent of GDP, with gradual increases over a 
period of time. Our challenge now is to decide what to do with the money. The point isn’t 
to just keeping doing the same things, only with more money. So that’s what we in the 
Ministry of Education are still trying to figure out. I’ve talked a lot about higher education 
with Minister [Aloizio] Mercadante, who was the main advocate of assigning 75 percent 
of oil royalties to education. So that’s where we are today.

Here [in Mexico] we heard a lot about secondary education. But what should we do 
about secondary education in Brazil? What goes for Mexico also goes for Brazil. The 
young people don’t want to study, they want to work. They don’t have the patience to 
be in a classroom just listening, listening, listening. In reality, the teacher is talking and 
[the student] is on his cell phone, plugged into the Internet around the world. He is 
internationalizing much faster than is the secondary education. As a result, there is 
huge problem of desertion at this level and we don’t have enough qualified young 
people to reach university. This is a big problem.

A majority of universities, including many of the best, have programs geared toward 
consolidating the students’ knowledge when they arrive, because they don’t arrive as 
well-prepared as before. Before, very few of us attended university. We were an elite 
group, so this problem didn’t exist. When I started university, nobody went to college. 
There were barely any universities in Brazil in the 1960s. Today, there are few students 
percentagewise, but even so we have 7 million students in higher education, between 
the public and private sectors. So basic education is a huge challenge, and we have to 
decide how we’re going to use all the money they say we’re going to receive.

**Do you think you will really get the money? Because in Mexico, they pass laws 
and set goals, such as in the case of the amount of funding for scientific 
research, and then nothing happens.**
I think so. I think they’re going to keep their word. And there is a ton of oil, and there will 
be a lot of money available for education, and also for healthcare, which is the other big 
challenge.

**While the United States is scaling back or dismantling many affirmative action 
policies and programs, on the grounds that they are either outdated or 
ineffective, in Brazil, you’re going in the opposite direction. What do you make of 
that?**
The impact of affirmative action [in Brazil] has been very encouraging so far, particularly when you see the growing presence of black students or public school graduates, who have had to struggle to get to university. But the universities need more programs, and more effective programs to receive these students, because they are now arriving in much bigger waves. The universities have to be prepared to receive these students.

I have seen a lot of studies which, contrary to expectations, show that the cotistas (beneficiaries of the quotas) are doing better than the non-cotistas, even without undergoing remedial programs. To what do you attribute the fact that these students seem to be doing well?

They are doing well, but we are still at the beginning, because the new Quota Law [for federal universities] is still very recent. Some [universities] are moving fast. Brasilia had started earlier, others too. But they’ve barely started the first phase that sets quotas at 12.5 percent. Next year, that share will go up to 25 percent, then 37 percent, then 50 percent. These are huge numbers of students. It’s not enough for them to be fighters. They’re at a real disadvantage, because they come from highly deficient public schools that prepared them poorly. Universities have to be ready, not only with tutoring programs, but also with scholarships that help them survive. We’re talking about very poor students, many of whom come from areas that are far from the universities. They have to sleep, eat and buy books -- and have fun. That costs money; it’s expensive. We are pumping a lot of money into social assistance programs. But we need to spend even more.