

What Do We Know About Quotas?

Data and Considerations About the Implementation of the Quota System at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).

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Since 2003, affirmative action policies have been implemented in public state universities in Rio de Janeiro State. Such policies aim to guarantee the access of economically and socially disadvantaged students to public universities. As Rosemberg has shown (2004: 65-74), Brazil represents a social paradox where only wealthier students have traditionally had access to free public university education, which is usually of very good quality. Such students, who most often graduated often graduate from expensive private high schools, have better chances to pass the university access exams – known as vestibular – than people in deprived groups. Socially disadvantaged students usually attend poor public schools and are not prepared to compete for the limited number of openings offered by the Universities.

State law in Rio de Janeiro now establishes that public state universities reserve 20% of their openings to “black” (negro in Portuguese) students, 20% to students coming from public schools, and 5% to students who are “native Indians” (indígenas in Portuguese) or “disabled”.² Considering that federal Brazilian legislation has still not established quotas, only state universities are compelled to apply the quota system in Rio de Janeiro State. Universities governed by federal legislation can, by contrast, decide whether to apply the system or not, according to the principle of University autonomy.³

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2 Since 2007, this last category also benefits “sons and daughters of policemen, firemen and prison security workers who died in service”.

3 This principle was questioned in January 2008 by the suspension of the quota system at the Federal University at Santa Catarina (UFSC) by the Federal Court of the State of Santa Catarina. The Court

The access of quota students to public universities in Rio de Janeiro State is not automatic. In order to be classified, candidates are requested to pass a first exam and score a minimum grade (20 points of a maximum of 100) on the first and the second tests, a multiple choice test and a written exam. If students earn the 20 points and did not score a zero on the second test, their entrance to the University depends on their rank among the other quota applicants students. The quota system also considers socio-economic criteria by establishing that the per capita income in the student household does not exceed R\$630 Brazilian reais (US\$315). Unlike “public school” candidates, self-declared “black” students are allowed to compete for ‘black’ quotas even if they studied in private high schools, as long as they qualify for the socio-economic parameter.

The introduction of the quota system in public universities by the legislation of several Brazilian states has raised a very heated debate in Brazil involving both the academic world and public opinion.⁴ Most of the debate concerns the legitimacy of the system. Quotas would potentially infringe the equality principle established by the Constitution, as well as the culturally widely accepted criterion of “merit”. From this perspective, the quota system would exclude a number of students who do reasonably well on the entrance admission exam. Quota students would be admitted even with a low score, a fact which, according to common opinion, would decrease the quality of education and the overall prestige of public universities. Some critiques of the affirmative action system at their universities are also based on the fact that quotas do not tackle the real problem of inequality in Brazil. The most commonly heard explanation for the limited access of the poor to public universities is the small number of “spaces” available in the public undergraduate system, and especially in the scarce state investment in public primary and high education. It is commonly believed that improvements at public primary and high schools would automatically give all Brazilian students the same chances to pass the vestibular.

By introducing quotas, the state is choosing a “cheap” and very partial solution, which involves no structural distribution of resources while state

considered the quota system “unconstitutional” for infringing the “equality” principle contained in art. 5 of the Brazilian Constitution.

4 For a detailed view, see PPCOR, 2006, *Mapa das Ações Afirmativas no Ensino Superior*, 4.

responsibilities for social inequalities are withdrawn. Quotas are a typical redistribution procedure compatible with a neo-liberal system because they do not create a direct cost for the state. Nonetheless, given that it is very improbable that any real reform of primary and high public education will occur in Brazil in the foreseeable future, the question is whether practical alternatives to the quota system really exist. On the one hand, it seems that both the Brazilian state and social movements are not strongly working at structural alternatives. On the other, it is doubtful that - even if public education received investments - public schools could ever compete with the private education system enjoyed by Brazilian elite.

When discussing the quota system, it cannot be denied that the major resistance that quotas face in Brazilian society are the racial ones. Affirmative actions respond to the need to increase the number of afro-Brazilians with a good university diploma and, consequently, give them the opportunity to occupy higher positions in society. This objective takes action against the social marginality and racial discrimination that the black population faced both during slavery and after Abolition. The actions of black social movements to support the introduction (and preservation) of the university quota system have been so powerful that the issue quotas are often seen as a race issue. As a consequence, the sectors of the black movement directly engaged with quotas have gained considerable visibility in Brazil. Educafro, a group born under the umbrella of the Catholic Church, is a clear example of this phenomenon. Establishing itself as a network of pre-university (pre-vestibular) community courses, Educafro sought to increase the number of black and poor students at public universities. Occupying a primary role in the fight for quotas, this organisation has gained considerable space in the black movement in Brazil.

The scepticism that racial quotas encounter in Brazilian society are related to the impression that the system racialises citizens (Fry 2005: 301-320; Maggie 2005). Brazil is not only a country where it is hard to say who is black or not, due to the high miscegenation of its population, but for a long time has been moulded by the ideology of racial democracy. According to a predominant view, since the Brazilian people are the result of racial mixture between European, African, and Native Indian populations, racial boundaries cannot be clearly drawn in this country and race relations are much more relaxed than in other contexts. As a result of this genetic mixture and blurred

racial boundaries, discrimination and marginality of the afro-Brazilian is due not to racial problems but primarily to class issues. After all, modern biology and genetics have already refuted any scientific legitimacy of the idea of “race”. In addition, a biological idea of race is the reason for which racism appeared and discriminatory policies were applied in past centuries. From this perspective, quotas are a way of racialising society by splitting it into black and white. In fact, more ethnographic studies are needed to discuss whether quotas really foster more racism or whether “black” students perceive themselves, and are perceived, as a separate “race”; or whether opting for a “black” quota automatically precludes other intermediate forms of conceiving the self, for example as “mestiço”, “moreno” or “mulato”. The Black Movement maintains that racism has long existed in Brazil and affirmative action measures are not its cause. Black activists usually question the “class” approach by the fact that even successful black people face discrimination because of their skin colour. If common sense still tends to associate black phenotype to marginality and poverty, this view might change only if a considerable number of black people come to occupy visibly strategic places in society. Most Brazilian universities today, including UERJ, rely on self-declaration to select candidates for the “black” quotas. Decisions about establishing a commission to evaluate the racial classification of candidates, the system used by the University of Brasilia (UnB), has found many critics at different levels of society. In spite of the ethical and practical problems about judging the “blackness” of candidates, there is the risk in self-declaration that some people self-declare as “black” simply to benefit from the quotas.

This paper wants to bypass this endless, though extremely important, debate on the legitimacy of quotas, for which many separate analyses would be needed. Instead, it will attempt to present some practical data that emerged from my fieldwork at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), where I carried out a qualitative and quantitative study of the quota system. UERJ has been one of the first examples of Universities that have applied the quota system in Brazil as a consequence of a legal requirement (Law 4.061/2003).⁵

In 2007, while in the middle of my PhD fieldwork, I was asked by Educafro to process and describe some statistical data about performance and other social issues that are important to quota students in that university. These

5 This law followed laws 3.524/2000 and 3.708/2001

data were released by UERJ's Information Department – DINFO (2007) – in an aggregated form, and needed some analysis in order to draw some useful conclusions. A brief and partial discussion of these data occurred during the Audiencia Publica sobre Sistemas de Cotas in the Procuradoria do Estado do Rio de Janeiro [Public Hearing about Quota Systems at the State Attorney General of Rio de Janeiro] in March 2008, but has found very little space elsewhere. I will use my data analysis as an excuse to show patterns identified at UERJ and raise some questions about the issues observed in the implementation of the quota system there. The analysis will be partially complemented by a few ethnographic observations I conducted at the University, where I interviewed study students, and academic and administrative staff to understand different factors/perspectives of the quota experience.

Academic performance and dropout rates among quota students

Data about the performance and dropout rates of quota students is quite interesting since this group is generally expected to do worse and have higher dropout rates than non-quota students. This expectation, however, is not reflected by data for the years 2003-2007, which shows that quota students have a higher Coefficient of Average Performance (CRM)⁶ than other students, if we exclude the Disabled and Indigenous category – which is statistically not relevant due to the low number of these students. In particular, it can be observed that from 2003 - 2007, students entering the university under the quota for public school students have an average CRM of 6,56, black quota students 6,41, and non-quota students 6,37. This average was calculated among 49 undergraduate departments/programmes and does not necessarily reflect the situation in each department. Even though the average seems to favour quota students, the CRM of the different groups varies depending on the department, as shown by the following examples:

Average Performance Coefficient in some Departments (2003-2007)			
	Public School Quota Students	Black Quota Students	Non-Quota Students
History (CCS)	7,15	7,22	5,67
Law	7,10	7,08	7,94
Engineering (CTC)	4,70	4,11	4,29

6 *Coefficiente de Rendimento Medio.*

Nevertheless, the conclusion cannot be made that quota students do better than non-quota students, only by relying on the differences in CRM between departments at UERJ. In fact, not necessarily all departments have the same weight due to the different actual distribution between quota and non-quota students in different undergraduate programmes and the different social standard ascribed to each course. In addition, some departments have a very low number of quota students and this population might not be statistically significant in all departments. In spite of these preliminary considerations, data suggest that there are no significant performance differences between quota and non-quota students at UERJ. Consequently, the quota system cannot be invalidated by arguments of supposed low performance of the quota students. This fact is important, considering the usually very different educational background of quota and non-quota students, their very different rank in the vestibular exam and the greater effort that quota students must make to overcome academic difficulties. No less important, a considerable number of quota students has presumably more difficult access to study resources such as books and the Internet. A limitation to this analysis is that the information offered by the University's Department holding statistical information is not divided by year. Consequently, we cannot determine the trend of student academic performance throughout the full undergraduate programme. The final average, for example, does not show whether the CRM of quota students tends to peak – positively or negatively – or to be constant during their academic life.

An additional way to evaluate the quota system at UERJ is by looking at dropout rates. Again in this case, general expectations about higher dropout rates among quota students are contradicted by facts. While 17% of non-quota students registered from between 2003 and 2007 dropped out, only 13% of black quota students and 10% of public school quota students dropped out. These data are, once again, an average among all courses. They also do not show in which year of the undergraduate programme dropouts tend to be more intense. The figures also do not consider that in some departments such as Mathematics, where dropout rates are very high, the concentration of quota students is very low and this population is statistically not significant.

By looking more specifically at the Law Department, data illustrate that non-quota students registered between 2003 and 2007 have shown higher dropout rates (4.83%) than black students (3.64%) but lower rates than

students who entered the public school quota (5.35%). Dropout figures in the History course show a 19.2% dropout rate among non-quota students, 5.38% among black quota students and 4.1% among public school quota students, considering the pool of students registered between 2003 and 2007. Although data show that quota students generally tend to drop out less than non-quota students, they do not explain why. While in the case of quota students it is arguable that lack of financial resources and academic weaknesses are the main reasons for leaving, non-quota students might be driven by different reasons when they drop out. A reason to be further investigated is that non-quota students may have more options to changes to a course that offers a better income perspectives, considering the relative facility they have in passing the vestibular exam. By speaking with some Law students I realised that many of them had already been registered in other courses such as Social Sciences, Philosophy and Literature, by the time they started the Law programme. Social Sciences and other Humanities courses might in some cases work as holding areas for students waiting for something better. It may not be a coincidence that non-quota students have high dropout rates in History, a career whose employability and economic return might not meet the aspirations of wealthier students, thus favouring evasion. For quota students, in contrast, a place at University is often the only chance to attend a good school, regardless of the course chosen. Especially among lower class families, where very few members, if any, ever studied at a University, a college graduate may at least represent an improvement of the family's symbolic status.

Considering the different social and thus educational background of students, it is important to recognize that non-quota students scored extremely well on the vestibular exam. In the 1st year law programme (begun in 2007), non-quota students passed the vestibular only if they classified within the first 168 candidates, among the nearly 3,000 candidates who were admitted to the final exam. In contrast, almost all of the quota students classified from the 1,000th to the 1,800th position. An additional difference between quota and non-quota students, is that many quota students have part-time, if not full-time, jobs in order to pay their expenses, if they are not able to mobilise a family network to get financial help. The financial help allocated by UERJ through the Proiniciar Programme offers R\$ 190 Brazilian reals per month (approximately US\$110) and during quota students' first

academic year. This amount that has recently been increased to 250 reais during the all undergraduate programme (law 5.230/2008). This is a substantial effort by the University, considering the low budget offered by the state. However, this amount is not sufficient to cover the needs of these students. The percent of students who work is usually higher among students in university nightevening courses, which offer a chance to study to full time workers.⁷ The amount of time quota students have to study is usually also reduced by the fact that in the first year these students are requested to attend several extra courses to improve their academic skills.⁸

If quota students manage to cope satisfactorily with the Law course, this can be explained by the fact that this course is in high demand by quota applicants. As a result, most quota students classified with a reasonably good mark.⁹ Also, as I have already mentioned, in the vestibular exam for Law in 2007, quota students generally placed between the 1,000th and the 1,800th position among approximately 3,000 candidates who were admitted to the final exam. Many of these students had also attended “pre-vestibular” community or private courses to prepare for the vestibular, and some of them took the exam a number of times before having success. This shows that quota beneficiaries in the Law Department are “neither “illiterate” or people with little understanding of a university. No less important, these students are not the least deprived and marginal in the Brazilian social pyramid. They often belong to low and lower-middle class families with some pre-conditions for social mobility. Usually, quota students are the first members of the family to enter a university, but they still have been exposed to some level of education. In some cases, a network of relatives supports the students, for example by sponsoring the purchase of books or paying for transportation. The chance for social mobility of one member is often seen as capital for an entire extended family.

Although the information about academic performance and dropout rates among quota students is encouraging, this does not mean that quota

7 UERJ allows students to study in a given course in the morning or at night. Night school allows students to keep a day job.

8 Attending these courses is a condition set by Proiniciar for receiving the scholarship of R\$190 Brazilian reais per month.

9 These students generally score B and C as a final mark in the *vestibular* exam (in less prestigious courses this mark is generally lower – with ‘A’ the maximum and ‘D’ the minimum).

students and non-quota ones have similar experiences at the University. By socialising with quota students, I have perceived that many of them find it quite difficult to adapt and earned far lower grades than non-quota students in the first evaluations. In addition, non-quota students seem very relaxed about meeting course demands, while quota students made a considerably greater effort in terms of study hours. At the beginning of the course, from September to December 2007, some quota students were quite frustrated by the unfair relation between time spent studying and grades. Some students even considered quitting due to their difficulty in studying, memorising and writing. Other quota students told me that they realised that the time they spent studying for the first exams was insufficient, but they were not sure about what they should do to perform well (for example, how long and detailed should an answer be in a written exam). As Fernando – a first year law quota student – said,

“Our Civil Law teacher explained that we cannot answer a question in one line, since we are expected to articulate a statement and show all we know about a subject...many students answered questions in a “yes” or “no” form, so the teacher explained that this is not a multiple choice test, it is a written evaluation!”

Fernando also mentioned the lack of effort with which non-quota students seemed to pass exams in the first year, even though they seem to be less committed. Having said that, the grades of quota students in general improved considerably in the second set of evaluations, after students enhanced their study methods and understood how they were expected to perform.

Before the second evaluations of the first semester I also noticed a strong solidarity among 1st year quota students, who in some cases were helped by non-quota students with a similar social background. Some quota students gathered in student study rooms several times in the afternoon to discuss course topics and help each other. The notion that the quota students are more dedicated is widespread in the class, even among the non-quota students. Quota students are often seen as those who take notes very carefully and study more, spend afternoons in the library and sit in the front rows of the classroom in order to pay more attention to what teachers say. It is a common belief that quota students study more in order to overcome educational weaknesses and because they usually invest everything in their academic opportunity, which they cannot afford to lose.

According to most of the people I interviewed, the weaknesses of quota students may relate mostly to their use of the Portuguese language, especially in its written form. However, no reference was made to any supposed inability of quota students to understand academic subjects. In fact, most 4th and 5th year students and teachers do not notice an important difference in performance between quota and non quota students, thus confirming the statistical data. During interviews, people often mentioned that some quota students will be very good professionals and that some of the best students in the class are quota students. In this regard, an upper middle class 3rd year student from Jardim Botânico stated:

“I have turned in favour of quotas by noticing that many quota students really deserve to be here...this is often the only opportunity they have in life to move on socially and they try to make the most of it...when I look at the grades we get I cannot see any real difference between us”.

The opinion that many quota students will be excellent professionals is supported by professors. However, some of them add that a rough use of the Portuguese language could be a penalising factor for some students, even though it will not represent an insurmountable barrier in the job market.

“There are quota students that are brilliant and with above-average intelligence. However, due to the socio-economic conditions to which they were exposed, some students do not write Portuguese very well; in this sense they might be penalised somehow in the job market...you know, lawyers and solicitors basically work with language.... This does not mean that these students are not improving their job chances by university education, and does not mean that all quota students cannot write Portuguese well...I personally lower a student's grades a bit when they make grammatical or spelling mistakes because I want to warn students that they have to be concerned about that” (Penal Law professor).

Questions about access and distribution of quota students in different courses

In my experience in the Law Department, the striking majority of the non-quota students interviewed originates from exclusive private high schools,

usually private institutions run by religious organizations. The quota beneficiaries, in contrast, are people who studied in precarious public or less exclusive private schools and could unlikely compete for a place in the Law Department without a quota. By analysing the classification in the Law Programme in the 2007 vestibular, I noticed that only 2 public school quota students (over 64 positions available in this category) and only 2 black quota students (over 64 positions available) would have passed without applying through the quota system. An additional public school quota student, and 3 black quota students would have been admitted even without if the quota system was not implemented at all, because in that case the pool of total posts available would be broader (312 posts). In total, just 8 students who applied for public school and black quotas of 312 candidates admitted to the Law programme would have been approved even without the implementation of a quota system. A similar situation is found for 2008.

Whether people agree or not with the philosophical and legal foundations of the system, quotas are favouring the access of people who were traditionally excluded from public university education, at least in traditionally elite courses such as Law. The change in the demographic landscape of the Law Department was observed by the Department as a whole. As Vivian, a non-quota Law student, stated:

“I also attend courses at the Federal University at Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), but the atmosphere is very different there, a very elite one...when I joined UERJ I was not even thinking about this...however, now I consider it great to relate to people of different social backgrounds at UERJ ...I think this is something that makes you grow up and I feel more at ease here”.

The change is also confirmed by students who started their courses before the quota system was introduced and by professors with pre-quota experience at UERJ. One law professor pointed out that various locations, not only the classroom, show that UERJ has new users.

“I realised the student collective has changed by looking at the people using the building elevators, or those sitting in the cafeterias on each floor”.

It is also interesting that the quickest way to define the change in the demographic landscape is by noticing the number of black students circulating at the University. White quota students are less indicative of this

phenomenon because white students have traditionally been users of the Law Department. The same teacher affirmed:

“I normally cannot tell when students are quota ones just by looking at their appearance...however, it is true that when I see black students I tend to think “they are probably quota students””.

It is worth saying that although change is more striking in courses that were traditionally exclusive to wealthy people, this is observed in all courses. At a minor level, according to several interviewees, even less prestigious courses such as History experienced some growth in the number of black or “brown students. This change is considered more visible in the morning programmes, where the number of wealthier and thus white students has been traditionally higher.¹⁰

Along with interview and ethnographic material relating to the new demographic landscape at UERJ, DINFO data contain important information about trends in distribution and access of this group of students in different University departments. To simplify the analysis I will show only data concerning the access of quota students in the first semester each year. The trend observed in the second semester has been in fact very similar.

Percentage (%) of students registered in the 1st semester each year, divided by category						
	Non-Quota	Black Quota	Public School Quota	Indigenous + Disabled	TOTAL	Black + Public School Quota
2003	39.11	37.89	23.00	0.00	100	60.89
2004	57.87	17.79	23.51	0.83	100	41.30
2005	64.86	12.72	21.41	1.00	100	34.14
2006	66.59	11.39	21.21	0.81	100	32.61
2007	73.71	8.74	17.05	0.50	100	25.79

In the first year of the quota system (2003), over 60% of the students were from the quota system and a very high percentage were “black” quota students. That year has to be considered very anomalous due to overlapping of different laws and the existence of different channels of selection.¹¹

¹⁰ A reason for this is that wealthier students, who are mostly white, do not usually need to work and can more easily study during the day.

¹¹ The state law initially foresaw that 50% of the vacancies in public state universities would be reserved for students who received their entire education at public schools in the State of Rio de Janeiro.

In 2004, due to the confusion of rules in 2003, the system was re-considered to establish a sole channel with 20% of vacancies for students who attended state public schools for all of their high school years, 20% for self-declared black students and 5% for indigenous and disabled people. Economic parameters were also established in 2004 and later reconsidered and currently there is a cap on family income for quota students of no more than R\$630 Brazilian reais per capita in the student's household. A minimum score, the mentioned cutoff mark of 20 combined points in the two phases of the vestibular, was also introduced in 2006.

In spite of the several changes to the system and the anomaly of 2003, some conclusions can be drawn about the trend in access to quota students from 2004 to 2007. The table shows that the most striking change concerns the decreasing percentage of quota students in the student body as a whole registered each year, in particular of black quota students. This level reached an alarming level in the first semester of 2007, when only 8.74% of students enrolled in academic programmes using black quotas. On the other hand, access by public school quota students seems to be more or less constant in spite of a slight decrease in 2007. This figure will show a further decrease in 2008, when only 15% of the 20% available was filled by public school quota students. It is worth noting that average figures do not necessarily represent what happens in each course. For example, it can be observed that while black and public school quotas were filled more or less constantly from 2004 and 2007 in disciplines such as medicine, law, social sciences and history, the trend in other courses seems to be declining. In statistics, physics, engineering, mathematics and economics, the black and public school quotas are filled well below the 20% established by the legislation, with figures often close to 0%. No black quota student enrolled in economics, statistics or mathematics in the first semester of 2007. It is important to clarify that those positions not taken by quota students are filled by classified non-quota applicants. As a consequence, the percentage of enrolling non-quota students

However, the selection of quota candidates in 2003 occurred according to two different channels, the SADE, specific for quota applicants, and the "Vestibular Estadual" for those students who did not fit the criteria established for the quota system. In the same year a new law established that 40% of vacancies in the same universities had to be reserved to students self-declared as "negros" ("black" and "brown"). This rule was extended both to SADE and to the "Vestibular Estadual" system, explaining why the number of self-declared black students admitted in 2003 was so high.

has increased constantly from 2003, reaching 75% of the newly registered students in 2008. In fact, the number of quota students presently studying at UERJ is far lower than people might expect. If professors complain about the quality of their students in courses such as math, statistics and economics, it would be important to inform them that they do not basically have any quota students in their class!

The data trends I have shown here encouraged me to look for possible explanations, even though this phenomenon is very little studied and no official explanations exist. The first considerations relate to why only some courses have constantly filled their quotas from 2003 to 2007. Some of these courses, such as medicine and law are considered elite courses, the ones that offer more rewarding job opportunities; others, such as social sciences and history offer less job opportunities but are very popular among students of different incomes. In all these courses, the high number of quota candidates guarantees that a high number of quotas get filled. On the other hand, a main factor possibly justifying the low presence of quota students in scientific programmes depends on the fact that these courses are generally both considered difficult and with low employability. Applicants usually believe that they are not good at math, especially due to the limited teaching of this subject that they received in public schools; many students also believe that scientific courses would condemn them to under paid jobs as public school teachers.

Analysis must be conducted of why there is a general decrease in quota students in several courses. However, due to the lack of “official” reasons, we can present a few hypotheses. One possible reason is that during the years immediately following the introduction of quotas, there was very high pent up demand from all those people who had not had a chance to conduct free university education before that time. This fact might partially explain why demand was particularly high in 2003 and 2004. However, other factors may have exerted some negative influence. A number of UERJ professors ascribe the decrease in the demand for quotas to the Prouni State Programme, which was introduced by Law 11.096/2005. Prouni calls for the state to pay tuition fees for needy students at private universities. These institutions are usually a better option for poor students because they are more widely located in the city and the suburban areas. With very few exceptions, private universities are also considered less demanding for people without a solid

educational background and less time available for studying. The Prouni explanation was confirmed to me by several students I met in community pre-vestibular courses.¹² In several cases, low income students did not believe they had a chance to pass the entrance exams at a public university or to handle the demanding programme, even though they are aware that public university holds higher status in Brazil. Most students do not even give UERJ a try because they consider the bureaucracy of the quota system too complex; other candidates desist after the first phase of the vestibular exam because they find Prouni to be a more accessible way to receive university education. No less important, the location of UERJ in the city would entail high transportation and time costs for many students, especially those who work, even though the Proiniciar Programme makes some effort to compensate for these expenses.

It should be said that the decreasing number of quota students who pass the entrance exam and register each year is complemented by a general decline in the number of UERJ quota candidates who took their vestibular exam between 2003 to 2008. In 2005, 73,890 candidates attempted the access exam, versus 69,662 in 2006, 63,699 in 2007, and 61,877 in 2008 (12,000 fewer candidates than in 2005). This phenomenon is not justified by the trend in the number of students graduating from high school each year, which, according to Professor Sobreira (Pedagogy, UERJ) should actually grow by about 3% per year according to Brazilian demographic data.

These figures seem to suggest that the availability of quotas does not automatically generate high demand. It cannot be denied that, by improving the public school system with massive state investments and increasing the amount of scholarships, more quota candidates would apply for the vestibular. Nonetheless, other factors are probably relevant. A specific point raised by the Black Movement - in particular Educafro - is that the introduction of a cutoff grade in 2006 kept many potential candidates out of the University. According to Father David Santos (Educafro), UERJ is getting around the law by hampering the quota system and returning a huge number of quota positions to non-quota students. A similar explanation is offered by Professor Henrique Sobreira from the School of Education at UERJ at Duque de Caxias.

¹² These courses prepare students for the vestibular exam at a community level and are usually attended by low income students. The objective is to improve the chances of low income students to enter Universities, at very little (or no) cost.

Sobreira points out that last year posts were not filled in many courses at the Duque de Caxias campus and he ascribes this to the increased difficulty of the vestibular exam. In particular, Sobreira believes that the cutoff grade was introduced in 2006 to limit the number of quota students who apply to the university, especially in the mostly highly sought courses.

“As a consequence of the cutoff grade, some of our courses in Caxias are half empty. In the past we received students who passed the vestibular with very low marks, but we managed to make them very good students. Nowadays, most of the best students who in the past applied to Pedagogy and other lower status courses manage to get a place in more prestigious programmes such as Law and Journalism, through the quota system. However, the places presently left empty by these students are not filled by new poor, because they might not earn the 20 points needed and are left out by the new grading system...these places are partially replaced by non-quota students and in many cases – as occurs in Caxias - even remain empty...We could say that quotas, in the way the grading system is established, are democratising elite courses such as Law but are wasting education opportunities for poor people in programmes such as Pedagogy” (Professor Henrique Sobreira, Education Department, UERJ).

Sobreira’s argument should be tested with more empiric research, but still represents a very important and intriguing point. In fact, even in the UERJ Pedagogy course at Maracanã – the main University campus – an incredibly high number of positions for quota students was reallocated to non-quota ones. Since this course was traditionally highly demanded by low-income students, the question is whether a paradox is really occurring at UERJ. Nonetheless, the variables influencing the availability of quota candidates to fill the posts are so diverse that no single approach can be satisfactory.

Due to the complex scenario, it is even more difficult to understand why the percentage of black quota students is decreasing in particular. It is not clear, for example, whether fewer black students finish high school and have the economic conditions to maintain themselves in the university. In the same way, it is not clear whether more black students, due to economic conditions and educational background, tend to opt for private universities with lower standards; or whether a more general problem is due to a reluctance students might have to register as black quota students. Evidence also emerged from my ethnographic research that many students who identify

themselves as black still prefer to try the vestibular in the public school category when they have a chance. In most cases I analysed, black students who used public school quotas did not like the idea of enjoying an educational privilege because of their skin colour. This raises an important issue relating to the experience of black quotas at UERJ, but cannot really be discussed here. I will simply observe that it is interesting that the same students find it quite reasonable to enjoy a privilege for the fact that they attended a public school, probably because this fact would relate to something wrong in the State and not in their bodies. The rationale through which these students form their opinion about racial quotas must be further explored along with its historic foundations.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed and presented some data arising from the implementation of a quota system at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). More than questioning or endorsing the legitimacy of quotas to assist disadvantaged groups at public Brazilian Universities, this study points out that deeper qualitative and quantitative research should be carried out where this system is implemented.

Data show that the academic performance of quota and non-quota students is very similar. In addition, average dropout rates seem to suggest that quota students quit school less than other students. Nonetheless, several variables must be taken into account when doing this kind of analysis, in order to avoid simplistic generalisations or a conclusion that the implementation of the quota system at UERJ does not raise complex questions. It must be remembered that there are differences between departments in terms of student population, prestige, and difficulty. In each department, the general distribution between wealthy and poor students, may vary considerably, as well as the tendency to drop out or perform well. More sociological and ethnographic research, along with further data collection should be carried out to understand who the quota and the non quota students are and why. A particularly troublesome phenomenon is that fewer quota students are getting access to many university courses in recent years. This situation is determined either by lack of interest of the socially disadvantaged students in many subjects, or by a mechanism of exclusion paradoxically generated by the same

quota system, as Sobreira suggests, sociological and anthropological research might help to cast light on this nebulous scenario.

As a final point I would like to mention the difficulty encountered in obtaining statistical data at UERJ, even when going through the highest levels of university administration. The university has a Department holding statistical information which has little opportunity for public access. In spite of this fact, some data were unofficially released in 2007 and reveal that UERJ has an incredibly rich pool of social and academic information. Such a paradox encourages reflection about the way the structure and practices of academic institutions might negatively interfere with the production of social knowledge, even when this knowledge relates to the institution itself. Easier access to data would be a great service not only to UERJ and its students but also to Brazilian society, where the general debate about the legitimacy of quotas may have partially obscured interest in how this system actually works.

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