
Affirmative Action in the Quality of Higher Education: the voices of graduates of the University for All program

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ABSTRACT This article is an overview of a doctoral dissertation which presents statements from graduates of the University for All Program (PROUNI) from a non-profit Brazilian university, who were admitted to university through this program. The methodology used was qualitative with a focus on textual analysis. The objective is to identify the outcomes brought about by the PROUNI graduates and to determine the importance of student engagement to improved learning and overcoming difficulties. The results are established in the dimensions of the quality of higher education: admission, process and result. In the admission dimension, the possibility of access to university education is highlighted through the affirmative action program PROUNI. In the process dimension, there is student engagement, the difficulties faced along the way and the retention of this student profile in the teaching institution. In the result dimension, the impacts on society are pointed out – namely, inclusion and the impacts on higher education institutions. The impacts on institutions are related to their social responsibility regarding social inclusion and to student performance, among other aspects. The impacts on society are in the context of employability, satisfaction and the motivational effect that the graduates have on the people around them.

The quality of teaching in higher education needs to go beyond that of ensuring the quality of professional development aimed only at the area of study itself, or specific professional development. It also needs to ensure quality for the prospects of social cohesion, employability, diversity and equality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). In this sense, Brazilian laws recommend quality academic education in different areas of knowledge, suitable for placement in professional sectors and for participation in the development of society. To this end, guidelines aimed at student access and retention in higher education are recommended (Government of Brazil, 1996). Among them is the creation of policies that facilitate higher education access for minority groups [1] (public school graduates, Afro-descendants, indigenous students, those with physical handicaps and others) through deficiency compensation programs with respect to previous academic education, enabling them to compete more equally in the selection and admissions processes at this educational level (Government of Brazil, 2001).

Affirmative action policies guarantee the admission of students belonging to minority groups in higher education since, according to Greenawalt (1983, p. 17): 'Affirmative action is a phrase that

refers to attempts to bring members of underrepresented groups, usually groups that have suffered discrimination, into a higher degree of participation in some beneficial program'. Among the affirmative action policies adopted is the University for All Program (PROUNI). This constitutes a public social policy that aims to place students from the public school network in private universities through the National Secondary Education Exam (ENEM; Government of Brazil, 2005). With the inclusion of students from minority groups in private higher education, diversity in the academic environment increases in various aspects such as sex, race, age, social class, culture and religion, among others. PROUNI provides diversity in the university.

The inclusion of those who are 'different' from a majority of students in higher education represents, for Barth (1990), great learning opportunities, since differences offer a free, abundant and renewable resource. That which is different is important in people and teaching institutions. Increasing the presence of people from different origins and socio-economic conditions in higher education institutions makes them socially as well as culturally plural and differentiated, providing greater economic and social advancement in the country (Schwartzman, 2005). In this sense, the inclusion of those who are 'different' triggers impacts on society, as well as on the university, since

Inclusion means inviting those who have been left out (in any way) to come in, and asking them to help design new systems that encourage every person to participate to the fullness of their capacity – as partners and as members. (Forest & Pearpoint, 1997, p. 137)

Reid (2005, p. 100) claims that: 'Inclusion does not happen – it is a process. Inclusion develops over time and the success of inclusion depends on the preparation and the foundation that have been put in place'.

The social interactions and student experiences in the academic universe are decisive for the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, and thus for the quality of education in different areas of knowledge (Cabrera et al, 1999). According to Tinto (1987, 2005), engagement is the most important argument for retention in college. Students who are engaged in activities on campus stay in the university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Pace (1984) found that a high-quality investment of efforts results in quality in the educational experience. The quality of learning can be evaluated by measuring the effort put into it (Astin, 1984). For Kuh et al (2005) and Kuh (2009), engagement is used to represent constructs such as the quality of the effort and involvement in activities that reflect learning. Student engagement corresponds to the variety and intensity of the actions and means used to better develop learning, and it also refers to the time made available for this end (Felicetti & Morosini, 2008). Moreover, student engagement can be observed in overcoming difficulties faced during the academic program, including practical difficulties versus difficulties with time, and geographical difficulties (Cabrera et al, 1992).

Human capital from higher education represents the main force of a country's economic growth (Brennan et al, 2004). A higher education degree can create opportunities regarding graduate employability and satisfaction, and can trigger impacts on the institutional environment, as well as on society. Knight and Yorke (2003, p. 5) define employability as: 'A set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen occupations'. Therefore, employability is an individual and multifaceted characteristic that derives from the ways in which students learn based on their experiences, implying something about the capacity and effort of the graduate to carry out a determined function in a job – a capacity which should not be confused with the acquisition of a job (Yorke, 2006). By taking care of the characteristics presented as employability, students are adding attributes to their professional profile, facilitating their placement in the job market and consequently contributing to their satisfaction with respect to their profession.

Satisfaction is understood as the pleasure that results from accomplishing that which one wants to achieve. It is the contentment that results from action. To this end, it needs to have meaning, functionality and usefulness. Since satisfaction involves results achieved from a determined action, it can be thought of in the existing relation between satisfaction and work. According to de Vries et al (2008, p. 72): 'job satisfaction can occur for various reasons. They vary from monetary aspects to aspects such as personal characteristics, the peculiarities of the job, the economic sector, the type of program and the level of the education–job match'. Studies point out that the relationship between job satisfaction and an undergraduate degree may be related to

monetary issues: the greater the salary, the greater the satisfaction (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Vila et al, 2007). Education and/or job satisfaction corresponds to a form of evaluating the impact that a new graduate profile has on the job market (society), as, according to Vila et al (2007), satisfaction is an excellent indicator of success since it reflects monetary as well as non-monetary compensation.

The brief theoretical overview provided here on engagement, employability, satisfaction and inclusion makes us consider more closely the inclusion of student diversity in higher education. The PROUNI student is part of this diversity, and the program thus provides the inclusion of a new student profile in the academic environment and job market.

Method

The methodology used in this research was qualitative (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The qualitative analysis consisted of a discursive textual analysis. This analysis was carried out for the answers to four questions in order to understand the positive and negative aspects observed by students with respect to PROUNI, as well as the difficulties faced during the academic program, and whether these student experiences are taken as examples or incentives by others.

The research was carried out with graduates from a non-profit higher education institution in the state of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. The subjects who were invited to participate in the research were the first class of PROUNI graduates from this institution, who were freshmen in 2005. The total number of students was 198 graduates and, of these, 134 responded to the research instrument.

The research questionnaire was administered to the respondents through the Google Docs application. This application generated a link, which was sent by email to those who responded and they submitted their replies online. The answers were stored in a Google Docs database and then exported to Word. There were more than 400 written answers transcribed in a table created in Word. The analysis first consisted of skimming through the answers presented. This reading made it possible to understand the context of the answers, and to perceive impressions and guidelines. It consisted of reading without notes, which provided a global view of the information (Bardin, 2009).

After this first skimming through of the responses, another reading was carried out, this time from a more acute perspective – that is, different excerpts with common characteristics were marked during the reading with different colors, such as, for example, the objective aspects, the subjective aspects and the constant inferences in the narrations. Then, other tables were created, in which the relevant points observed in the analysis were organized. Such points appeared in the tables only as quantitative data in the a priori categories.

Creating the tables made it easier to organize the textual portion, since deconstructing the corpus (the information based on the open guiding questions) and breaking it down into units involved a disassembly process of the answers, highlighting their constituent elements. This focused on the details in the component parts of each answer. This fragmentation originated the analysis categories: (1) Entering the University; (2) Living in the Academic World, which incorporates three subcategories: Practical Difficulties versus Difficulties with Time; Difficulties in the Commute to the University; and Socio-affective Difficulties; and (3) Results of the Path Taken and its subcategory, Encouraging People.

Entering the University

The PROUNI graduates saw this program as a unique ‘opportunity for individuals “thirsty” for knowledge to have access to a practically intangible university for the disadvantaged, whether economically, socially and/or culturally’. The graduates addressed the issue of difficulty of access from three perspectives: economic, social and cultural. These, in turn, are interconnected and, as is evidenced historically, the issue of access is tied to social class conditions. Affirmative action policies have been outlined in a way to change this panorama in Brazilian higher education. An example is PROUNI, considering that the

aspects of this program are entirely positive, since people coming from lower-income classes, such as myself, would never have access to universities, since you can only get into the federal

universities if you pass the entrance exam, namely vestibular, if you had a preparatory course for this.

One respondent argued that:

there should be massive investments in basic education and in reducing poverty, so that everyone can move towards higher education as equals. This way, the government ends up offering benefits that try to minimize the problem of inequalities in basic education instead of guaranteeing quality education at the basic levels.

In line with this statement, there is a report by members of the Federal Senate's Committee on Education, Culture and Sports which points out that the problem with higher education in Brazil is students' basic education and that if the country wants better quality in higher education, it needs to strengthen basic education through investments in education as envisaged in the National Education Plan (Government of Brazil, 2001, 2011). It is known that the problems in Brazilian education are at all educational levels. However, it is assumed that citizens who are educationally prepared at higher levels can positively influence the preceding levels of teaching.

Living in the Academic World

With the PROUNI scholarship, the respondents pointed out that they were able to take various courses in a single semester: 'I could take various classes per semester and graduate more quickly, but if I did not have the scholarship, I would be able to pay for one or two courses per semester, running the risk of dropping out'. Others even argued that not having to pay for college decreased the 'pressure, the stress of having to make the monthly payment, thus enabling a greater dedication to studying'. However, if, on the one hand, some cited the time/speed factor for completion, others mentioned the time span of the scholarship as being short, since they believed that the scholarship could be longer: 'I needed more time to complete the program and I did not have it. I worked a lot and I could not take many courses at the same time'.

In the same way that it is known that people are different and learn in different ways and at different paces, it is also known that the nature of the courses that comprise each degree is different. Thus, that which could be easy for some may be the opposite for others. If, on the one hand, there were graduates who completed their degree in less time, others needed more semesters, either due to the nature of the course or the structure of the program, or even the demands of the job market.

Another positive aspect presented was the issue of retention in a program: 'PROUNI guaranteed that I could study and graduate easily, being able to work and live during this period'. This graduate argued that not having to pay for college enabled her to remain in school, since she needed to work to support herself and, as she herself said, to 'live during this period'. This statement is in line with a decrease in tension, consequently making it easier to be dedicated to studying, since, according to Cabrera et al (1992), by removing the anxiety, time and effort associated with obtaining resources to finance education, students not only interact more with colleagues and participate in activities on campus, but they are also more involved in academic activities that increase academic performance.

Supporting oneself at college is as important as, if not more important than, access, since access is only the beginning of the educational process. It is necessary to follow up on students in order to help them during the program and contribute to their retention in the program. Retention in a higher education institution is strengthened by providing scholarships, and PROUNI is a way of guaranteeing student retention in the university, thus avoiding dropouts.

Psychopedagogical or psychological care can help towards greater engagement – that is 'more student follow-up makes them more participatory and applied', since, as one respondent commented, 'it is necessary to keep PROUNI's situation in mind, ever since needy students started to attend private universities, which until then was an environment for a higher social class (in my understanding)'. Another student claimed that: 'it is indeed humiliating to have to prove that one is poor'. This implies a feeling of inferiority, which denotes the need for an initial follow-up until the student is able to adapt.

The adaptation process is difficult for all incoming students, but mainly for those who feel discriminated by their social condition in the face of colleagues. This is observed in the following student statement: 'I was a PROUNI scholarship holder and I kept it a secret. Maybe my secret was because of the prejudice that I observed'. However, if, on the one hand, there were students who felt some form of discrimination, others highlighted the position of the university as a source of support:

I was a PROUNI scholarship holder and I received from the university equal treatment to those who were not scholarship holders. The university received me as equal to the rest of the scholars, with no difference for being a PROUNI scholarship holder. I am very grateful!

PROUNI has been a major step forward in and for Brazilian society. However, the issue of merit or, better, the *engagement* of the graduates while they are students cannot be forgotten. With respect to this, one respondent wrote: 'The rigorous criteria of the process should always be taken into account, so that the benefit is not given to students who are lax in their academic studies and who later may not complete the program'. The lack of engagement by some scholarship holders was observed by their colleagues. This means that there is an understanding of what engagement is within the academic environment and of the results that a dedication to studying provides:

I THINK that the students are the key point of the success of the program. The students are dedicated, they study, they make an effort and really deserve the opportunity that the government is giving them. Certainly they will grow not only financially, but mainly as people, as human beings.

The issue of engagement appears frequently in the statements of these graduates: 'I am increasingly proud of having been able to earn a full study scholarship through my effort and dedication at a private university and graduate'. Engagement, according to the testimonies, seems to be associated with learning, since, according to the respondents, success results from the amount of effort invested: 'I tried harder in the classes to pass in all the courses. I completed my degree in the necessary time because I could afford to complete all the required courses'. Student success in higher education does not depend on who the students are, but on what they do, what they study and the determination that they have to accomplish their objectives: 'I believe that I benefited a lot and made good use of the scholarship, because I never failed, I never had to take any courses over and I only missed classes when I was really sick'. With regard to the requirements, one graduate noted that: 'the requirements for positive results with respect to passing and attendance generated a considerable amount of quality in my learning'. This statement evaluates the requirements of the university and of PROUNI as encouraging points and generators of greater engagement and, consequently, quality learning.

What individuals feel or think does not reflect their engagement, but how they behave and what they do is what defines and identifies engagement: 'I made the most of it. I tried very hard during the program, and at the end, on graduation day, I was honored as the best student of my class. A great honor for me and for my family'. Student engagement is what reveals success and retention in the institution. Completing college inevitably requires effort. This graduate's answer is in line with what was written elsewhere:

I know that, if we really fight for our dreams, we can achieve them, which depends on us and our future, and when opportunities appear, it is up to us to give our best, every day, to not only improve just our life, but to contribute to a better society.

The social and intellectual experiences and phases during the years at university are factors that contribute to personal as well as professional growth, which better provides for facing an intended career after graduation. To this end, there is a need for engagement to permeate such activities. In the following statement, observe the respondent's engagement, interest and dedication to his chosen program:

During the entire program I interned at the city forum in the countryside where I am from (voluntarily in the first two years), which contributed very much to my career. Without PROUNI, I would not have had the prospect of attending university (due to the lack of family resources).

This was evident in the various testimonies reported above, as well as in others: 'I seized this opportunity with both hands ... I embraced it with all my might and I did the program with more effort and dedication ... I participated in events, research projects, monitoring'. The answers observed are in line with what the literature defines as 'engagement' (Astin, 1984; Felicetti & Morosini, 2008; Kuh, 2009).

Practical Difficulties versus Difficulties with Time

Going to university means much more than going to classes. It means being absorbed in that which it provides, dedicating oneself and being engaged in learning, in order to prepare oneself for the job market and for life. However, in the reality of the 2005 PROUNI graduates, preparing oneself for work also meant that studying happened concomitantly with working.

Studying is seen as work, and both studying and work are seen as virtues that dignify man and educate the good citizen (Franzoi, 2006; Nardi, 2006). Hence, students who study and work have a double work shift, and reconciling both jobs is not a simple task, since both studying and work require dedication. Working, for the PROUNI class of 2005 scholarship holders, apart from having been a need that prevailed as a vital point to staying at the university, was also a source of aid for the family. This can be observed in the graduates' statements: 'My greatest difficulty, I believe, was in the issue of working and studying, since I had to work during my undergraduate study to help my parents and also to support myself'. The responsibility that comes with these students can be observed, since the salary obtained from their job was not only necessary to pay their personal expenses, but also those of their family. This means that this student profile cannot rely on financial resources from their family. On the contrary, the family depends on the student income, even if it is almost negligible.

Supporting oneself in the program means having financial resources for transportation, food, materials, photocopying and books. But even if they were working, many graduates were faced with financial difficulties, since the salary from their job was often small. This was pointed out by one graduate: 'I was a scholarship holder ... I received R\$300.00 in aid. I had difficulties supporting myself'. The financial difficulties faced by the students are also reflected in their access to the Internet, computers and other peripherals: 'My difficulty was basically financial ... without money, without books, without a computer at home to take advantage of at the weekends and do work'. To have a computer in the computer age seems to be an easy matter. However, when one's income is low, acquiring this tool becomes very difficult, since there is no way that one can afford to spend money on a computer when one's money is needed for food, electricity or water. In other cases, some have computers, but they live on the outskirts or in a rural area which the Internet networks do not cover.

The existing relationship between work and time was also a difficulty pointed out by the graduates. A large portion of the statements referring to the issue of work associated it with a lack of time to dedicate to the assignments required by the program. Thus, work and study are categories that have time as an intersecting factor – that is, work consumes time and studying requires this time: 'The lack of time to be more dedicated to studying was my biggest difficulty, since I worked full-time (in two different jobs) during the entire period of college'. In the graduates' statements, there is a clear desire to study more and to be more dedicated to the program, but, as one respondent claimed: 'due to work, I did not have much time to study and to be more dedicated to college'.

Only having time to dedicate to studying is not sufficient as an explanation. What really matters is how to better invest this time. To know where, how and with what to use time constitutes a very important factor:

I had many assignments, which sometimes accumulated, since there was not enough time to do everything that was asked ... if I could have more free time, I would be able to be even more dedicated to my college assignments. I caught up on the assignments at the weekends.

The issue of time, as pointed out by the respondents, is related to doing more, learning more, reading more and participating more – that is, it is directly related to the issue of engagement, since it refers to the intensity and variety of actions and means that corroborate the development of learning. Therefore, to complain about the lack of time to be able to study more evidences the

engagement of these students in their learning. In the words of one graduate: 'The difficulties appear to make us stronger and more competent, faced with new situations. I believe that this turns into knowledge'.

Difficulties in the Commute to the University

The distance covered by the students to reach the university is directly related to the practical versus time difficulties presented above. This is justifiable, since there is a cost involved in paying for transportation and time spent en route to and/or waiting for transportation. Observe the relation between time and commuting in this graduate's statement: 'The greatest difficulty I faced was the commute to the university, around 1 hour to go and 1 hour to come back'. And with respect to the cost: 'I spent a lot on bus tickets'. The time spent commuting, when depending on the bus, can be considered 'lost' time – for example, part of the two hours spent commuting by the graduate in the statement above could be put to use in the library with reading or research, and this is not to mention the physical stress that the trip causes.

The stress triggered by traveling every day is not only physical, but also mental, since being on the road generates constant tension and worry due to the physical condition of many roads being precarious. Many of the respondents lived on the outskirts of the city, in rural areas, in neighborhoods far from the campus and in neighboring cities, or worked far from the university: 'to go to college I would go to another city that is 45 km away. In my city, there are no universities'. Hence, there is evident dependence on the bus routes or school buses for commuting. And, in the midst of this dependence, there were obstacles to the means of transportation that would take them to the university: 'since there were few students and the road that connects the two cities is [made] of dirt, this made it even more difficult, since nobody wanted to provide transportation for the few students who commuted'.

Some graduates tried to take advantage of the time they spent on the bus: 'I would take advantage of the time by reading. Sometimes, the reading was so complex that I couldn't read on the bus. Thank God I don't feel sick when I read on the bus'. Time spent commuting and the cost and physical and mental stress that result from daily trips to a university, work and/or between both are difficulties that a large percentage of Brazilians face nowadays. And these difficulties are no different for students from minority groups who are dependent on public transportation. However, the distance, the travel and the stress were not reasons for the failure of these graduates.

Socio-affective Difficulties

Admission into a university is accompanied by a series of transformations that become part of student life – among them the network of friendships. Adapting to an academic environment depends on a set of factors that make incoming students feel like they belong to the program and the university. These include connections with colleagues, activities developed on campus and relationships with professors, among others. However, their colleagues are different. They need to be won over, 'and to feel prejudice with respect to social class' can initially inhibit these connections. There is a need to establish new friendships. The affective links with colleagues and friendships are essential to adapting to the new environment. Apart from the feeling of belonging to a group, friendships enable the sharing of experiences and support in the face of difficulties. Getting involved in a class or group slowly develops into more flexible relationships. Friendships become established and sociability begins:

Initially, there was a lot of 'prejudice' masked as resistance to the presence of an 'adopted being' in a community, until then, consisting only of the elite. As much as I could be there physically among them, I was a stranger, whether because of my appearance, language, confidence, or behavior. But this started to break down and I evolved and observed the evolution of 'others'. Finally, those who want to learn are not surprised by barriers, but overcome them.

To become integrated and to be a member of a new reality refers to one's social insertion and to forms of interaction with other people. Thus, integration is a two-way process involving the person who is being integrated and the person who is allowing the integration. Both sides learn and

mature, growing together in the sociability process, and there is an enrichment of experiences and cultures, since, according to Barth (1990), differences in philosophy, style and passion are notable sources of ideas that lead to the improvement of the student environment.

Another question related to student interaction, though not connected directly to life in the university, is leaving the parental home and one's home city: 'Due to the scholarship I had to move to another state, and begin to live with people who were not directly involved in my daily life. I was far from family and friends. I suffered a lot with prejudices'. Leaving the parental home with the intention of studying in another city is an important event for students. Apart from the new experience, in the new student context, there is a need to belong to the city and to the student halls of residence, among other things. The experience of leaving the 'nest' is perceived as something difficult and important, since it is associated with one's independence.

Another difficulty of interaction is connected to the former academic trajectory of the students coming into higher education via PROUNI. Perhaps one of the greatest problems that the students in question face is in the low quality of public education, upon which they depend in order to go to university. Thus, the practical issues already addressed in this section do not only impose limitations of a physical nature, but also in the intellectual development of the student. However, the difficulties faced by the respondents were transformed into challenges that were overcome over the course of their academic journey: 'Difficulties? They still exist, but I am very happy! We should never give up on our dreams'.

Results of the Path Taken

'PROUNI was a milestone in my life.' Academic education was at the core of the positive points that featured in the answers with regard to PROUNI. For the graduates, to be a higher education graduate 'means being respected in the face of the more advantaged social classes; it means having the opportunity to learn and to have knowledge; it means opening doors with respect to knowledge as well as with respect to citizenship'. It means acquiring something that cannot be lost: 'nobody will take knowledge away from me! With higher education, apart from feeling valued, one can live with dignity, feel confident and more motivated to face difficulties'.

Together with higher education comes the implicit issue of employability. The research indicates that being a graduate is associated with the job that one has: 'To have a higher education degree gives the opportunity to people without financial conditions, but with a great intellectual capacity, to enter the formal job market and compete on equal ground with those who had better conditions'. This statement points out the issue of formal work, which means having a defined profession: 'to have a formal profession means being able to compete more equally in the job market and having the guarantee of better job possibilities and consequently better salaries'. It could not be any other way since an academic education leads to the formation of a broader set of personal qualities that make people better prepared for the job market, thus enabling them to get better jobs and be more successful professionally. Another respondent confirmed the relationship between his education and his job:

Today, at 23 years of age, the same year in which I graduated, I passed in first place in a public selection process. I have already been called and my job is guaranteed. My two jobs fulfill me professionally and I know that I only got them because I have a degree, a merit of PROUNI.

Many of the respondents also highlighted the need for qualified professionals for the job market in order to meet its demands. Today, 'the job market is increasingly competitive'. Another respondent commented:

Thanks to PROUNI, I have a dignified life today. It was through the opening in college that I was able to get my first job, where I am until today and, thankfully, I have a dignified salary. With my salary I have helped my mother, who has a restaurant. She employs 2 more people. Consequently, my position in PROUNI opened the doors for my job, through which at least 4 more people benefited indirectly. This makes the economy go round. I am thankful every day for the opportunity that was given to me.

This statement demonstrates the relationship between PROUNI and the job market not only directly for the graduate, but also for those connected with him, since his salary as a graduate enabled him to help his mother set up a restaurant, thus opening up new job positions for others.

The value placed on studying was also observed, since studying, having a degree and continuing to study represented for the graduates of this program a breaking of paradigms. In their eyes, PROUNI is 'changing the "undereducated parents, undereducated children" paradigm'. These graduates' statements pointed out that: 'people with higher education help make the city better, they change their environment, and people become more educated ... educationally prepared people contribute to the improvement of their environment'. This means that there have been changes, and that PROUNI has been contributing positively to the improvement of the quality of life of those who have benefited from the program, as well as their families. Other respondents viewed the program as a beacon – a path that had enabled the accomplishment of a dream, turning the dream of higher education into a reality: 'It's like it was a dream!!!'

As can be observed, PROUNI has been playing a fundamental role in society – that is 'the right to education, independently of financial conditions'. Thus, it provides social 'inclusion of people who are economically needier' – in other words, the socio-economic rise of minority groups, since this new profile of graduate professionals is being placed in the job market. This demonstrates that PROUNI has been contributing in such a way that these groups, who previously had no access to higher education, can now have access and consequently improve their own lives and those of their family, their environment, society in general and, by extension, the Brazilian reality.

PROUNI is 'an inclusion program that enables learning with others, with those who are "different" and leads to enriching experiences, as well as culture'. This statement is in line with studies by Barth (1990) and Forest and Pearpoint (1997), among many others, which are dedicated to the issue of social inclusion. Graduates and academics agree that inclusion is a process – it is a path; it means doing something different and with those who are 'different'; it means growing in and with one's country.

Encouraging People

Some of the graduates' answers pointed out the opportunity that PROUNI provides for teachers who still do not have a higher education degree. One particular teacher who graduated from this program has become an example of hard work and persistence, valuing the scholarship offered, as well as her profession, since she believed and believes that teacher education is a continuous process of improvement and investing in oneself and in the profession. She is an example of hard work for her students and ex-students, as well as her peers, since, after teaching her classes in the countryside, she would travel to the university. Her statement pointed this out: 'Many of my ex-students here from the countryside, who no longer studied, went back to studying and are in college with a PROUNI scholarship'. Another teacher highlighted that: 'My colleagues at the school, for example, felt motivated to get a higher education degree. One is even getting it with a PROUNI scholarship'. The experience of being a scholarship holder influenced her peers, since through a colleague's experience it is possible to catch a glimpse of new horizons in terms of acquired knowledge, qualifications or monetary compensation.

Some answers illustrate the direct incentive within families: 'Relatives went back to studying with the perspective of going to college in the future. My mother enrolled at EJA [2] and already completed elementary education, and she enrolled my father as well'. Observe that people who have not studied for a long time are returning to study, encouraged by the possibility of being admitted to a university and being able to complete a university degree.

PROUNI has been intervening not only in youth education, but also in that of more mature generations. This can be seen in the following testimony:

Apart from my personal accomplishment, during this period my mother went back to studying and completed secondary education, since she wants to study nursing. And now that there are more sources of income – few, but they exist – she has a chance to continue to pursue her wishes. Among other things.

It appears that influence is occurring in the opposite direction here to what one might expect – that is, the children's education is influencing that of the parents. PROUNI has been promoting two effects. The first is that children who are graduates are encouraging their parents to get a degree. The second is with respect to the generation who will follow that of the PROUNI graduates, who will tend to be graduates as well, since, according to studies by Ferreira and Veloso (2006), the educational level of people in Brazil tends to be transmitted from generation to generation, showing a high degree of consistency between them. PROUNI has been promoting educational mobility within families in both senses – from parents to children and vice versa. Some of the graduates' answers evidenced this: 'the program has encouraged a lot of people who never dreamed of going back to school and taking the ENEM to try for PROUNI, including my husband and my daughter'.

Other statements pointed out the desire to have a higher education for their children due to their parents' education: 'I have two daughters who dream of having a university degree and I hope they can do it'. A reciprocity of influence, in fact, seems to be taking place. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) point out evidence which suggests that a higher education degree not only provides an increase in knowledge and critical, reflective and sophisticated thinking, but also influences the nature of the lives of graduates' children.

Apart from the influence between parents and children regarding studying, there is an influence and/or incentive between siblings: 'Since I am the oldest among four siblings, all of them are studying more to have the same chances as I have. I was a great incentive to all of them'. The success of a family member resulting from education encourages others, whether they are younger or not, to believe in the strength of education.

Many of the respondents indicated that they were the first to get a university degree in their family: 'My parents were happy with my degree. I am the first person in my family to graduate!' According to studies by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), the college experience can be more important for students of first-generation families at this educational level than for students whose parents already have a degree. To be the first to graduate at this educational level represents for the whole family, whether directly or indirectly, a change of perspectives and positions in a wide variety of ways, among them one's world view, which broadens and moves beyond one's local vicinity. The graduate becomes a family reference: 'In a way I ended up becoming the "model" to be followed by other members of the family, since I am the first graduate in my family!'

To be the first in the family to graduate opens the doors of the university world for the rest of the family. It makes it easier for them, since the unknowns are unveiled, the myths are debunked, the obstacles are removed and the path is made clearer. This does not mean that there will not be any difficulties for those to come and that everything will be in place, but it represents the possible and the real, and makes it possible to see the end of the path and that such an accomplishment might be anyone's, depending on one's individual determination and effort – that is, depending on the engagement invested during the course of the program.

To be seen as an example of success and victory represents real perspectives for others, since the example is alive and close to hand, and one can talk to the example, exchanging ideas and learning. The influence on cousins appears to be great, as many of the respondents claimed to have been encouraged by their example. This is illustrated by the following quote: 'Other cousins after me were able to get a scholarship as well'. Another testimony suggested that PROUNI enabled access to more competitive programs: 'I have two friends who are doing medicine today'.

The accomplishments and/or perspectives of a higher education degree seem to indicate economic improvements in the family context and also consolidate PROUNI in society. As one graduate wrote: 'Just the possibility of seeing someone's dream realized is already encouraging. Imagine when this dream is collective'. The graduate was referring to the realization of this dream by a large number of secondary education graduates who previously did not have a prospect of realizing this dream. Now, however, through this program, they were able to. To realize the dream of a group means encouraging a larger number of people to pursue the accomplishment of their ideals.

Many scholarship holders serve as a reference for public schools in their city: 'As soon as they found out that I had gotten the scholarship, they called me to give "talks" in high schools in my city to encourage students to take the ENEM and this way they could participate in PROUNI'. People

who are close to a graduate start wanting to know more about the program, since they can see that it is a program which works and provides much more than a title.

Final Considerations

With the access of minority groups to higher education, higher education institutions are fulfilling their social responsibility (Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Superior, 2009), since this provides social inclusion and benefits affirmative action. This achieves the objective outlined in this research, since it provides diversity in the academic environment and, thus, inclusion in higher education institutions and society of a new academic profile. Hence, inclusion is not just a set of temporary or static educational guidelines, but a social value which recognizes education as a right that belongs to all citizens – a right to quality education free from discrimination and prejudice.

The difficulties pointed out seem to be intimately connected – namely, financial difficulties, a shortage of time and socio-affective obstacles, among others, which act concomitantly, triggering one another. However, according to the respondents' testimonies, it was in the academic space that they felt a sense of belonging to the program, to the group and to the university itself; that they shared their expectations and were incorporated in the structures of the new context; that they gave meaning to their path through college and learned to deal with their difficulties; that they were engaged in learning, and organized and intertwined their time, work, fatigue and breakthroughs. This academic space enabled them to (re)build and/or give greater meaning to their experiences; it enabled them to face adverse or challenging situations – both positive and negative – which added to their learning, maturity and personal as well as professional growth. In this sense, the desire to succeed overshadowed their difficulties. Their engagement was present and in line with that which was initially defined in this article regarding student engagement in learning – that is, students are the protagonists of their learning if they want to learn.

In the majority of the statements, the satisfaction of having a degree and having a job reflects the employability that has been developed and acquired. People tend to be satisfied if their salary reflects their market value and they have respect for others in their profession. Graduate satisfaction comes from their personal development, their autonomy at work and financial return. Therefore, satisfaction with the results of an academic education influences and/or encourages people surrounding the graduate – namely, people in their family environment, from work and in their local community. This is relevant, since experiences of success are related to attitudes, results and expectations achieved, and are taken as examples and incentives to accomplish that which is desired. Results of success serve as an incentive and as a driving force towards new achievements.

The graduate testimonies point out that their education is an incentive to relatives, friends and the neighborhood with respect to secondary education students being more dedicated to studying and to the reciprocity of the academic influence between parents and children. PROUNI appears to be promoting this latter tendency, since children with academic degrees are influencing their parents to have the same level of education. There is a coming and going of encouragement between the generations and no longer only from parents to children, as previous literature suggests. This represents an educational movement within families.

Satisfaction with one's education leads to a perception of the impact it has on society as a whole, since satisfaction is an indicator of success. The respondents can see that a higher education degree leads to improvements in their lives, their families, their immediate environment and, consequently, society as a whole, since education is the best way to achieve social balance. Thus, when there is social diversity in the university population, there are greater possibilities for social mobility, as well as a decrease in the distance between the social classes. On the other hand, when social diversity is not present in the academic environment, social differences continue to increase, since students from culturally affluent families have not had, and/or do not have, much influence over the cultural and social environment they are from, and have not reflected, and/or do not reflect, on significant changes in their family environment or among their friends – that is, they contribute indirectly to society maintaining a great distance between the social classes.

Notes

- [1] This term is equivalent to students who are under-represented and identified as having 'initial disadvantages' – that is, differences with respect to issues such as socio-economic situation, gender, race, culture, handicaps, place of residence and age.
- [2] Education for youth and adults.

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