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## COMPETE FOR WHAT? FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS IN BRAZIL

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**ABSTRACT:** The marketization and financialization of higher education in Brazil can bring severe social and economic consequences. This research aimed to understand how the faculty body of a public university in Brazil perceives the reforms of the public higher education system, which are currently undergoing political approval. The results of the analysis of variance test suggest that there is a significant difference between professors aligned with neoliberal values and those who are not, in the direction that the alignment to neoliberal values undervalue the importance of the public higher education system to society. Also, professors aligned with neoliberal values are more likely to give away administrative autonomy to external stakeholders, focusing more on meeting students' expectations, and seeking private sponsorship to raise funds.

**Keywords:** Higher education. Educational policy. Commercialization. Public education. Financialization.

### COMPETIR PARA QUÊ? PERCEPÇÕES DOCENTES SOBRE AS REFORMAS DO ENSINO SUPERIOR PÚBLICO NO BRASIL

**RESUMO:** A mercantilização e financeirização do ensino superior no Brasil podem trazer graves consequências sociais e econômicas. Esta pesquisa teve como objetivo compreender como o corpo docente de uma universidade pública no Brasil percebe as reformas do sistema de ensino superior público, que estão sob aprovação política. Os resultados do teste análise de variância sugerem que há uma diferença significativa entre os professores que são alinhados aos valores neoliberais e aqueles que não são, no sentido de que o alinhamento aos valores neoliberais subestima a importância do sistema público de ensino superior para a sociedade. Além disso, professores alinhados aos valores neoliberais são mais

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propensos a ceder autonomia administrativa a *stakeholders* externos, focando mais em atender às expectativas dos alunos e na obtenção de recursos privados para arrecadar fundos.

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino superior. Política educacional. Comercialização. Educação pública. Financeirização.

### **¿COMPETIR PARA QUÉ? PERCEPCIONES DE LOS DOCENTES SOBRE LAS REFORMAS DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR PÚBLICA EN BRASIL**

**RESUMEN:** La mercantilización y financiarización de la educación superior (ES) en Brasil puede traer graves consecuencias sociales y económicas. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo comprender cómo el cuerpo docente de una universidad pública de Brasil percibe las reformas del sistema público de educación superior, que se encuentran bajo aprobación política. Los resultados de la prueba ANOVA sugieren que existe una diferencia significativa entre los docentes que están alineados con los valores neoliberales y los que no, en el sentido de que el alineamiento a los valores neoliberales subestima la importancia del sistema de educación superior pública para la sociedad. Además, es más probable que los docentes alineados con los valores neoliberales cedan la autonomía administrativa a actores externos, centrándose más en cumplir con las expectativas de los estudiantes y obtener financiamiento privado para recaudar fondos.

**Palabras clave:** Educación superior. Política educativa. Comercialización. Educación pública. Financiarización.

## Introduction

The Brazilian public higher education (HE) is recognized by its excellence in research and teaching. Even if most of the HE institutions in Brazil are private (2,306 versus 302 public ones—INEP, 2021), among the 13 Brazilian universities that appear between the thousand best in the Times Higher Education's World University Ranking 2021, 11 are public (eight federal and three state-owned), and only two are private. A study from the Brazilian Academy of Science showed that researchers from public Higher Education (HE) institutions are responsible for 95% of all the national scientific publications (MOURA, 2019). Moreover, 19 public universities are among the 20 largest patent applicants in the HE sector in Brazil (INPI, 2018). Allied to these data, Brazilian public universities are recognized for their quality in research, teaching, and service, with their 45 university hospitals conducting more than five million medical appointments per year (INEP, 2021).

This fact, however, failed to stop former president Jair Bolsonaro from expressing his disregard for the public education system since he took office (XIMENES et al., 2019; SILVA JR.; FARGONI, 2020; LEHER, 2021). Even though his tenure came to an end following his defeat in the 2022 election, his ideas about HE in Brazil had already gained a momentum in the society, finding resonance among various sectors. For example, a former federal minister of Education under his administration declared that Brazilian public universities have low performance and their campi foster an atmosphere of revelry (KER, 2020). Based on these arguments and enjoying substantial popular support, the Ministry of Education cut 30% of the funds allocated to all federal HE institutions, also reducing scholarships and investments in research (BRASIL, 2019). This narrative quickly permeated social media platforms, serving as a launchpad for sustained pressure on universities and catalyzing substantial cuts to their financial resources until 2022.

In this context, the Ministry of Education launched in 2019 a program (named Future-se) designed to reform the HE system in Brazil. The law project assures that it aims to strengthen the public universities' autonomy by focusing on three areas: research, technological development, and innovation; entrepreneurship; and internationalization. The Future-se Program proposes that public universities sign contracts with foundations created within the universities themselves, without the need for prior recognition from the Ministry of Education. The final text of the bill, besides changing the possibilities of contracts between universities and social organizations, also changes the principles and guidelines of the agreements signed. The currently contracts have, as a clause, performance goals that will need to be evaluated through a list of indicators. The program represents the so-called marketization and financialization of the Brazilian public HE (SILVA JR.; FARGONI, 2020; LEHER, 2021), something that has already happened in Europe, the United States, and Australia.

In the United Kingdom, for example, the HE marketization and financialization started in the late 1980s and were consolidated in the 1990s. England replicated the American and Australian discourse that the costs of maintaining HE were too high and expensive for the government to keep (INGLEBY, 2015). HE that was initially founded by taxpayers became entirely funded by the students, leading the educational system to market values. These changes brought consequences for the HE, such as student consumer-like behavior, competition, and intensification of social inequality (RAAPER, 2017).

Consequently, students began to see HE as a transaction cost, in which knowledge could be bought, and the university was seen as a simple service provider (JABBAR et al., 2018; NIXON; SCULLION; HEARN, 2018). Also, universities started to compete among themselves for resources, in a relationship in which they would barely survive (HARVIE; DE ANGELIS, 2009). Raaper and Olssen (2015) state that the stress and sickness among faculty increased, exemplifying that a senior researcher of the Imperial College committed suicide because he failed to get funding for his research. Furthermore, the marketization of HE increased social differences because students from wealthy families were at a clear advantage. Jabbar et al. (2018) found evidence that students who were not previously academically qualified to enter top universities had their access granted because of their capacity to pay.

Germany, on the other hand, turned back educational reforms. Some universities that charged fees in 2006 and 2007 retreated shortly thereafter (HÜTHER; KRÜCKEN, 2018). Such a decision was based, among other things, on the increasing dropout rate—restraining equal opportunities—and the worries of falling behind at the global competition in both aspects of innovation and knowledge development excellence (JABBAR et al., 2018).

The consequences of HE marketization and financialization in Brazil can be even more devastating. The economies of developing countries are more dependent on market values than welfare. Furthermore, in these countries, market has little or no interest in investing in HE as a public good (MARGINSON, 2006). Some even have argued openly that the Brazilian HE system should focus on training laborers for the market instead of preparing them academically (ADMINISTRADORES.COM, 2014). Besides threatening the Brazilian scientific development, the marketization of the public HE would reduce the quality of working conditions in HE institutions, and increase overall social inequalities (SOUSA; COIMBRA, 2020).

Given these arguments, one could argue that professors in Brazil would struggle against projects such as Future-se. On the other hand, besides being a heterogeneous group, the spread of neoliberal values might affect how faculty perceives the reforms. Professors may agree to the ongoing reforms and support them, thereby eliminating the need to discuss and rethink the changes.

In this sense, Taylor (2017) argues that the notion that public HE should be run like a business is spread throughout all social spheres, and the collective thinking is that the “fact that colleges were not run like a business meant they were inefficient and in need of market reforms including a less collaborative, more rigid top-down corporate management structure” (TAYLOR, 2017, p. 113). In addition, Brazil might be going

through the same process as the UK, in which the lack of information and passivity of the faculty while facing the changes made room for the implementation of the reforms; when they realized the magnitude of the change, it had already been made. In the UK, changes started smoothly “or at least not easily understood or recognized by unsuspecting and largely uninformed academics” (RAAPER; OLSEN, 2015, p. 151).

This research sought to understand how the faculty body of a public HE institution in Brazil perceives the HE reforms. This study was conducted at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG). UFMG has more than 30 thousand students, and three thousand professors spread across four campi and two hospitals. It is the best federal university in Brazil and the fifth best in Latin America, according to the Times Higher Education’s World University Ranking 2021.

This research intended to contribute to the discussion on marketization and financialization in HE. Nixon, Scullion and Hearn (2018) state that the literature on marketization in HE lacks empirical evidence since the field is filled with a growing rich and critical set of theoretical works. Raaper (2017) draws attention to the importance of the context of public policy development. For this author, further investigation is necessary to understand how the HE public policies are implemented and how they may redefine the faculty subjectivity. Gunn and Mintrom (2016, p. 253) ask for more empirical evidence on the effectiveness of public policy development, investigating “whether governments will pursue impact agenda in a positive, developmental way, or in a more punitive, narrow-minded fashion” Jungblut and Vukasovic (2018) claim that the introduction of market elements in HE is related to different political preferences and ideologies in political agendas, including strongly market-oriented, and welfare states.

To practitioners, this research has the potential to support and stimulate the discussion about the public HE ongoing reforms by understanding what the faculty body thinks about the changes and how they perceive these changes from a broader perspective.

## Theoretical Foundation

In this section, we present neoliberalism as embedded values of individualism and marketization that supposedly assure the *well-functioning* society. Later, we point out how neoliberal practices changed the public HE system, establishing market values in research and teaching. Finally, we discuss the role of public HE focusing on the Brazilian context.

### Neoliberal Practices in Public Higher Education

Neoliberalism stands that the rationale which supports private companies’ management would benefit society due to a “trickle-down effect” that would emerge from profits obtained by private companies, which should therefore focus only on shareholder values and profits (FRIEDMAN, 1970). More than that, this rationale should be adopted by the society as a whole, becoming a “new world rationale” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016), to be embraced by private companies and the remaining public institutions and companies, as well as by individuals in their daily activities. This rationale benefits from the propositions of agency theory (JENSEN; MECKLING, 1976), which criticizes bureaucratic management as managers (“agents”), would not fully meet the owner’s (“principal”) interests; for instance, managers would try to conciliate the owner’s and workers’ interests in order to avoid conflicts that would damage the firms’ daily performance.

In the long run, however, this behavior would damage the “value of the firm” (JENSEN; MECKLING, 1976) as, in capitalism, workers’ interests should be subordinate to the owner’s interest. Therefore, the “principal” should control the “agent” and set up “accountability and transparency” within management by

means of new forms of governance, and, at the same time, foster “desirable” behaviors through incentive schemes that tie “agent’s” and “principal’s” interests.

In this sense, public services, even if not privatized, become more dependent on economic authorities (CHATELAIN-PONROY et al., 2018), which would be best “managers” since, as representatives of markets (the “principal”), economic authorities would know better how to allocate capital. Public services were also “colonized” by neoliberal practices, which is reflected in the so-called “new public management” (NPM) or “managerialist” practices in public administration. NPM arose during the 1980s in the United Kingdom and consolidated itself as one of the traits of the “new labour” party in the 1990s. Among its main aspects, NPM proposes the employment of professional managers in the top of the public sector, who are “free to manage;” these managers would act with greater responsibility towards public agents, typically by focusing on explicit standards and performance measures; a focus on output control rather than procedures; greater competition in the public sector; greater discipline in the use of resources, especially focused on cost reduction (HOOD, 1991).

NPM introduced managerial practices in public services such as health (BEVAN; HOOD, 2006) and education (HARVIE; DE ANGELIS, 2009; DIXON; HOOD, 2016; FISHER, 2020). NPM principles and practices in education spread out worldwide, as pointed out by Van Houtum and Van Uden (2022) in the Netherlands, Kalfa, Wilkinson and Gollan (2018) in Australia, Chatelain-Ponroy et al. (2018) in France, and Carlotto and Garcia (2017) in Brazil. NPM practices work as an “isomorphic tendency” (CZARNIAWSKA; GENELL, 2002, p. 463) that allows institutions from around the world, despite different contexts, to be comparable among each other.

In HE, NPM usually means that academic labor becomes more quantified, standardized, and controlled (HARVIE; DE ANGELIS, 2009), thus introducing a “neoliberal discipline” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). Universities must raise funding from public or private entities in a competitive way, aiming at self-financing (CZARNIAWSKA; GENELL, 2002). HE rankings are established in order to help those entities to decide where to allocate their capital (DIXON; HOOD, 2016). Rankings are fed by performance measurement systems (PMS), which are designed to quantify all academic activities such as teaching, researching, and participating in universities’ administrative activities (HARVIE; DE ANGELIS, 2009; KALFA; WILKINSON; GOLLAN, 2018). Considering public HE, both rankings and PMS aim at fulfilling aspirations of transparency, accountability, and societal control over public investments (GUNN; MINTROM, 2016), therefore achieving legitimacy.

Along with these governance practices, HE reforms show a tendency to focus on research and publishing results rather than teaching (KALFA; WILKINSON; GOLLAN, 2018; VAN HOUTUM; VAN UDEN, 2022). Within the “knowledge economy” rhetoric, universities are considered one of the most important loci of “producing knowledge,” i.e., producing “value” through research. Nevertheless, not any knowledge is judged to be “useful” or “relevant,” in the sense that applied, or STEM research tends to be valued in detriment of basic or humanities research (GUNN; MINTROM, 2016). In addition, focusing on publishing may be explained by the existence of a publication industry. Commercial publishers created rankings, which allegedly would offer transparency and accountability for academic work, and over time converted publishing in the sole legitimate form of knowledge dissemination (VAN HOUTUM; VAN UDEN, 2022).

On the other hand, when teaching activities are taken into account, their assessment is built over a representation of students as consumers (HARVIE; DE ANGELIS, 2009; INGLEBY, 2015; NIXON; SCULLION; HEARN, 2018; FISHER, 2020). Reflecting neoliberal values, students as consumers are considered as “individual choosers” (NIXON; SCULLION; HEARN, 2018), whose needs or desires such as “employability” or “obtaining the right set of skills for the job market” should be satisfied. Evasion should be avoided not necessarily due to societal concerns, but because students are sources of funding by means of tuition fees and universities compete globally to attract them (HARVIE; DE ANGELIS, 2009).

## **The Role of Public Higher Education in Brazil**

Education is supposed to support knowledge about the social spaces that guides individuals, as well as about their own reality, in order to provide freedom of thought and a critical perspective. In HE, knowledge that is centered on the holistic development of the individual towards society is even more critical because students are now mature enough to understand their role in the community as individuals and professionals. Providing access to HE is also related to the reduction of social inequalities (DELORS, 2010).

In Brazil, HE follows the Federal Constitution, specifically the Law of Guidelines and Bases for National Education, enacted in 1996. This law establishes that HE not only trains individuals with a scientific spirit, but also aims to solve contemporary problems (national and regional) by promoting cultural knowledge and a reflection within a humanistic perspective. Brazilian HE institutions can be public or private regarding ownership and can also be research-centered or teaching-centered, being accredited as a college, university center, or university. Universities are characterized by the association between teaching, research, and extension. Most universities in Brazil are public, and most colleges are private. Public universities are financed, almost entirely, by the government, and students do not pay tuition or fees (FRIGOTTO, 2009; OLIVEIRA, 2009).

Discussing the role of public HE implies defining the meaning and concept of public and the nature of the “public good,” for which universities may have a central role (WATTS, 2017). Ghanem (2004) explains that appropriate education should strive for a balance between knowledge in favor of community interests and production of “public good.” Moreover, a public good is any product or service that can be consumed by any number of people without being depleted and can be consumed by everyone in the same way. Based on this concept, knowledge as a public good cannot be marketed as a “product of education,” eliminating the notion of education as a commodity (MARGINSON, 2006; 2011).

University education is a public interest insofar as its core practices, such as teaching and research, are conducted to promote reasoning and engagement in the knowledge puzzles (WATTS, 2017). Therefore, to accomplish their role, public HE demands managerial autonomy and freedom of thought, including freedom for teachers to define their class content and research focuses (GAPPA; AUSTIN; TRICE, 2007). The activity of the university is not fixed, as the production of knowledge is diverse and incapable of being encapsulated, transported, and commercialized (MIDDLEHURST; ELTON, 1992). In other words, HE activity is not a product, and, besides being guided by public policies, education is temporal and based on social practices (GRAY; O'REGAN; WALLACE, 2018). Another argument that helps to understand the public importance of HE is its importance in economic, cultural, and social development areas (DELORS, 2010).

## **Public Higher Education Reforms**

In Brazil, the discussion about the role of public higher education is inserted in the international discourse of the commodification of education (FRIGOTTO, 2009; OLIVEIRA, 2009; KLEES, 2017; ALBA, 2019; MARTINS, 2021). There is a tendency on the political arena to reduce public HE to an institution aimed to meet market demands, like training professionals according to the market needs and researching according to market interests (WATTS, 2017).

Regarding the role of the government, there are pressures from the financial sector to reduce the state's participation in HE (ALBA, 2019). Mundy (2002), Klees et al. (2012), and Leher (2021), among other authors, discuss this notion within the scope of the World Bank's actions that reassures its responsibility in disseminating the neoliberal agenda in education at developing countries, thereby trying to position itself as a “knowledge bank.” In the 1980s, the World Bank assumed the position of the largest international aid

agency and lender for education. Privatization in public HE has been seen as an effort to diminish public control over university finance and rely on private business know-how.

As a result, political interpretations and actions based on a utilitarian and neoliberal logic, linked to the geopolitics of knowledge, turned education into an economic issue (SANTOS, 2020). In the Brazilian context, reports show the expansion of private HE institutions with the creation of colleges and university centers that do not need to engage in research activities (OLIVEIRA, 2009). The presence of large corporations in the Brazilian educational sector, along with the expansion of distance learning, contribute to the movement of commodification and privatization of HE (COSTA; SILVA, 2019).

The neoliberal values of competence, employability, and meritocracy reinforced the idea of transforming HE into a market, to meet the demands and imperatives of the economic order (HURSH, 2016). The strategy of privatizing HE in Brazil is based on the concept of “public good,” and manipulates the discourse in the direction that university produces a public good that can be transformed into a “private good” to be sold as a product to consumers (students and business groups) and/or financialized in the stock market, therefore benefiting the whole society. According to Banerji (2018), the financialization of HE contributes to inequalities in income and wealth, as the financial system continuously reproduces the capital logic by controlling process to make a profit.

To analyze the marketization and financialization of HE sector in Brazil, it is necessary to understand the context from several perspectives, especially the faculty’s role, since they are supposed to have power and knowledge to critically step in. In this sense, how do professors perceive their role in HE and the university’s one as well? Watts (2017) explains that professors still see their role as agents of critical thinking and value the free forms of knowledge produced at the university. Most academics think of public HE as a means to achieve social and economic development. In addition, professors are not willing to lose autonomy in teaching and research, indicating a contradiction between the perception of the professors and the political and economic agenda. At the heart of these contradictions, there is the daily practice of the HE, constantly questioned under the concepts of efficiency and governance (LIMA, 2021).

However, neoliberalism values in the form of the NPM practices such as performance systems may change the ethos of academic work, especially in the case of public HE (CHATELAIN-PONROY et al., 2018), and values such as collegiality may be exchanged for competition and individualism (KALFA; WILKINSON; GOLLAN, 2018). Consequently, these new governance practices may generate “autoimmune” effects, leading to results which are opposite to the very ones aimed by these practices, thus reducing quality, academic freedom, and societal contribution (VAN HOUTUM; VAN UDEN, 2022).

These NPM practices are present in Brazil, as shown by the Future-se Program. The program reflects what Costa and Silva (2019) characterize as the new academic neoliberalism in Brazil. The assumption is that HE should cease to meet societal needs and that those who go to public universities should pay, freeing the government from investing and financing public HE (SILVA JR.; FARGONI, 2020). This logic reformulates the investments in public education consolidating the commodification of education (OLIVEIRA, 2009; CASTRO; ALMEIDA, 2020). In practice, the program is an attempt to seek financial autonomy for the public HE by reducing and later removing the financial obligation of the Ministry of Education. It is the first step to withdraw HE from the federal budget, releasing the State from financing public HE.

Upon the argument that public universities are expensive, bureaucratic, and inefficient, the HE reform emerges as an alternative to transfer the responsibility for seeking funding for their activities to the universities (WEGNER, 2020). It also moves managerial responsibilities to external entities, social organizations, and foundations. The Future-se Program proposes that public universities sign contracts with social organizations—which are private associations—, making them responsible for managing ordinary



expenses, teaching activities, research agenda, and service programs. These contracts are subjected to performance evaluation. Besides, these reforms propose the creation of a management committee and an investment fund to support and manage the expenses of the public HE institutions.

## Research Hypotheses

As previously discussed, neoliberalism is more than an economic model, as its practices spread over several aspects of society. It became a “general rationale” which “colonized” fields other than economy, such as HE. Therefore, it is expected a global alignment with neoliberal values, even in the public HE sector in Brazil. However, due to the critical nature of the public universities, we expected a diversity of opinions and values regarding the neoliberalism from the faculty body because they are dedicated to research and critical thinking. Our first hypothesis stated that professors of public HE are not a homogeneous group regarding the neoliberal values and beliefs:

- The global alignment to neoliberal values tends to be heterogeneous between professors of public HE.

The general media and the government politicians try to justify the proposed reforms by convincing the society that public universities in Brazil are failed institutions because they are not managed as private organizations. However, those who work and study in public universities in Brazil tend to question this discourse because they are aware of the university functioning and quality of their outcomes. Even with all the political and finance sector pressures to impose neoliberal values, those who work at public universities still think that public HE actively contributes to economic development, and it is a way to reduce social inequalities. Therefore, the hypothesis 2 is posed:

- Professors of the public HE system in Brazil tend to agree that public universities are important to society because it fosters economic development and reduces social inequalities.

The process of commercialization and financialization of public HE does not happen without struggles, even in developing economies. Public universities in Brazil are one of the few sectors that still cultivate a different ethos from the neoliberal rationale. The “colonization” process accomplished by neoliberalism produces new forms of governance, norms, and routines. The proposed reform in Brazilian public HE brings several losses disguised under the discourse of autonomy and efficiency. Universities are expected to lose government financial resources and seek for money elsewhere; autonomy and be ruled by a committee run by market professionals; and research/teaching freedom and follow the committee regulation. On the other hand, professors who believe and defend neoliberalism are comfortable with the changes in public HE governance proposed by the reforms. Therefore, the third hypothesis is:

- Professors aligned with neoliberal values are more likely to support university governance ruled by market norms.

## Methodology

### Sample

The UFMG is located in the Southeast region of Brazil. Its academic community includes 3,189 faculty, 4,272 technicians and administrative employees, 32,332 undergraduate students, and 11,707 graduate students. There are 20 colleges spread across four campi in three different cities.

This research was first submitted to the approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the university. With the official approval, we sent an informative e-mail to the dean’s office of the main colleges, the president

of the Faculty Union, and key professors. In this e-mail, we attached an invitation letter to participate in this research and we asked for their support in forwarding it to the faculty. The invitation letter had the questionnaire link with an explanation of the objective of this study. We also ensured the independence of the research and stated the participation was voluntary and anonymous. We used the Google Docs platform to collect the data.

A total of 105 professors answered the questionnaire. The results of the power analysis, performed in the G\*Power software, indicated the power of 82%, for a medium effect size and significance level of 5%, which is sufficient to test the proposed hypotheses. The power analysis is a statistical technique useful to define the minimum number of respondents sufficient to run the statistical test because it includes the sample size, the effect size, and the significance error to compute the probability of do not incur in a type II error (BORGES et al., 2020).

Most of the participants of this research are from the Engineering School (56%) and Social Sciences (32%). We also had responses from Medicine and Biomedicine Schools (12%). All the 105 participants are professors at UFMG, with an average age of 49 years old. The youngest respondent is 30 years old, and the oldest one is 73. The average membership is 16 years, with admission year varying from 1977 to 2020.

## Instrument Development

The questionnaire is composed of four sections. In the first section, we asked about global concepts of society functioning regarding efficiency, individualization, competition, and “marketization” of education. This section measures how well the respondent agrees to the neoliberal thinking, in a Likert type scale varying from 1 to 5, in which five represents total alignment.

In the second section, we assessed the participants’ perceptions of the role of public HE in society as a tool to promote economic development and reduce social inequalities. The items were measured in a 5-point Likert scale, in which 5 indicates that the respondent strongly agrees that public HE is important to promote economic development and reduce social inequalities.

In the third section of the questionnaire, we asked about the governance of the university concerning administration and autonomy, objectives of the university, and financial resources. The items were measured in a 5-point Likert scale, in which 5 presents that university administration should be professionalized, aim for teaching, and prepare students for the market, and use private money to invest only in research with financial return.

Finally, the fourth section addressed occupational and demographic characteristics.

We employed confirmatory factor analysis in R software to assess the consistency and adequacy of the measurement instrument. Table 1 shows the standardized loadings, standard error, average variance extracted, and composite reliability for each variable. All the results exceed the threshold indicated in the literature suggesting that the instrument is adequate to measure what it was designed to (HAIR et al., 2018).

**Table 1.** Measurement model parameters.

| Variable                            | Item                          | Standardized loadings | Standard error | AVE  | Composite reliability |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|------|-----------------------|
| Neoliberal thinking – alignment     | Efficiency                    | 0.935*                | 0.08           | 0.53 | 0.82                  |
|                                     | Individualization             | 0.602*                | 0.05           |      |                       |
|                                     | Competition                   | 0.704*                | 0.07           |      |                       |
|                                     | Marketization                 | 0.632*                | 0.06           |      |                       |
| Public higher education and society | Economic development          | 0.758*                | 0.05           | 0.61 | 0.76                  |
|                                     | Social inequalities reduction | 0.801*                | 0.08           |      |                       |
| University governance               | Administration and autonomy   | 0.897*                | 0.07           | 0.53 | 0.77                  |
|                                     | Objectives                    | 0.549*                | 0.06           |      |                       |
|                                     | Financial resources           | 0.698*                | 0.06           |      |                       |

N = 105; \*p < 0.001; AVE: average variance extracted. Elaborated by authors.

The correlation between variables was lower than the square root of the average variance extracted for each variable, indicating good discriminant validity. The fit indexes of the estimated measurement model were also satisfactory [ $\chi^2(36) = 334.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ]. The fit parameters, including the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.934), goodness-of-fit index (GFI = 0.916), and the approximation error (RMSEA = 0.08), all exceeded the threshold.

## Findings

The descriptive statistics of the overall data show that most of the respondents are not aligned with neoliberal thinking regarding the poor efficiency of public administration (mean  $M = 2.37$ , standard deviation  $SD = 0.97$ ), individualization of the outcomes ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ), competitiveness as a positive value ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ), and “marketization” of public HE system ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ). The participants also agree that public HE is an important tool to promote economic development ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) and reduce social inequalities ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ). Also, the professors think that the university should be administrated with autonomy ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ), aiming to balance teaching with research and prepare students not only for the market ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ), and funded mostly with public resources ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ).

To test the hypotheses, we ran the analysis of variance test in R software. First, the data were divided into two groups: respondents who are aligned with neoliberal values—ranging from 3 to 5—; and respondents less aligned with neoliberal values—those who scored 1 to 2.99 in the first section of the questionnaire. The results indicated that 20% of the participants agree with neoliberal thinking ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ ), and 80% of the professors disagree with the neoliberal values of efficiency, individualization, competition, and “marketization” of HE ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ).

Levene’s test determines whether the variance across both groups is equal. The results indicated a lack of homogeneity of variances for the global alignment variable [ $F(1,103) = 2.43$ ,  $p = 0.12$ ]. Moder (2010) explains that, in the case of differences in variances, several solutions are recommended, such as employing a robust method capable of controlling the type I error. The author concludes that the Welch test, for example, is suitable for handling the lack of homoscedasticity for a small number of factor levels. Therefore, the results suggested that there is a significant difference between the group of professors aligned with neoliberal values and those who are not aligned [ $F(1,37.62) = 153.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ]. As result, *hypothesis 1*, which stated that the body of professors tends to be heterogeneous concerning neoliberal values, was supported.

*Hypothesis 2* posits that professors in the public HE system in Brazil tend to agree that public universities are important to society. So, we tested how the two groups think regarding the role of public HE in society as an important tool to foster economic development and reduce social inequalities. Levene’s test showed that the assumption of the homogeneity of variances was not violated [ $F(1,103) = 0.483$ ,  $p = 0.489$ ]. The overall data suggested that professors agree that HE is important to society ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ), thus supporting *Hypothesis 2*. However, the result of the analysis of variance indicated that there is a significant difference between groups [ $F(1,103) = 9.69$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ], in the direction that professors who are less aligned with neoliberal values are more positive regarding the importance of public HE system to the society ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) when compared to those professors who are more aligned with the neoliberal thinking ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ).

About the university governance, Levene’s test indicated homoscedasticity [ $F(1,103) = 0.256$ ,  $p = 0.614$ ]. The results indicated that professors aligned with neoliberal values are more likely to give away administrative autonomy to external stakeholders, focusing more on meeting the students’ expectations, and

obtaining private sponsorship to raise funds ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ). In contrast, professors with low alignment with neoliberal thinking tend to disagree that the university should be governed following market norms and targets ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ). The findings supported *hypothesis 3*, indicating that there are differences between both groups regarding university governance [ $F(1,103) = 42.171$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ].

## Discussion and Implications

The Brazilian federal government has proposed HE reforms guided by neoliberal values. These reforms assert that public universities should be run like a business, reducing the government's participation in financing the HE system and changing the governance of public universities (TAYLOR, 2017). Under the idea of efficiency, public HE institutions should give up autonomy and be ruled by an external committee of stakeholders (HARVIE; DE ANGELIS, 2009; KALFA; WILKINSON; GOLLAN, 2018).

What is happening in Brazil had already happened in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States of America under the NPM guidance as part of a political agenda in the 1980s (JUNGBLUT; VUKASOVIC, 2018). The HE reforms open a new and profitable market to the private sector, consolidating the marketization and financialization of education, and transforming public HE into a commodity (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). The results are well-known and not encouraging. Indeed, Germany already noticed that universities competing for resources aggravated social inequality and made their HE system public and free again.

In this context, this study sought to understand how professors of a public HE institution in Brazil perceive the ongoing HE reforms. Our hypotheses were that neoliberalism values are so imbricated in society functioning that some professors agree with the marketization and financialization of the public HE system in Brazil. However, we also hypothesized that the faculty body is not homogeneous because some areas still cultivate a different ethos from the neoliberal rationale. Our findings indicated that professors are a heterogeneous group, with the majority (80%) disagreeing with the neoliberal values of efficiency, individualization, competition, and marketization of education. However, this heterogeneity also shows that 20% of the respondents are aligned with the marketization view of education. This may indicate a tendency, even in public HE, to meet market demands and transform HE into a product, as claimed by Klees (2017), Watts (2017), and Alba (2019).

Our findings also indicated that the participants are aware of their role in the society in the sense that public HE contributes to economic development and reduces social inequalities, as pointed out by Delors (2010). Those professors who are less aligned with neoliberal values are the ones who have the strongest perception of the relationship between HE education and positive income and wealth. As Watts (2017) has pointed out, professors' perceptions are still critical regarding their role and the universities' role in the society, even in the face of social, economic, and political pressures to prove otherwise.

Finally, our findings showed that professors more aligned with neoliberal values are more likely to accept public HE to be managed like a business. Despite being outnumbered in this sample, professors aligned with neoliberalism are willing to adopt efficiency, individualization, and competition values in the university governance by focusing on results and letting the committees formed by stakeholders decide about academic, administrative, and financial goals. They also believe that universities should prepare students for the market and should be funded by the private sector.

This rationale aligns with the overall political discourse (replicated by the general media) that universities are expensive, inefficient, and only those students who directly benefit from public HE should pay for it (WEGNER, 2020). This could bolster proposals, such as the Future-se Program, which focus on

improving financial efficiency in public universities, undermining their social role. Additionally, as previously discussed, the introduction of new neoliberal governance practices in public service may change the ethos of public work; therefore, one may ask if workers not aligned with neoliberalism could change in the long run, becoming supporters of neoliberal rationale and practices, especially if the new governance practices succeed and if those professionals who adhere to the rules of these new practices also succeed in their careers, to the detriment of those who resist.

The major contribution of this research is to provide empirical evidence on how public HE faculty perceive reforms and think about their roles. This contribution adds to the ongoing discussion on the marketization and financialization in higher education, thereby addressing the gap pointed out by Nixon, Scullion and Hearn (2018). This research intends to shed the light on the importance of professors' involvement in the political agenda on education, drawing attention to the nature of the proposed reforms—whether they are narrow-minded or developmental, as discussed by Gunn and Mintrom (2016); the ideological preferences, as posited by Jungblut and Vukasovic (2018); and the importance of the context of the public policy development because it can redefine faculty subjectivity, as claimed by Raaper (2017).

This research brings important implications for practice. Our sample indicated that most professors are not aligned with neoliberal values, believe in the social role of public HE, and are not willing to give up autonomy and freedom. Currently, the Brazilian public HE reform lies quietly in the House of Representatives due to a change in the political party in power. However, there is a political agenda in Brazil financed by the private sector to promote the financialization and marketization of the public HE.

Additionally, one fifth of the respondents in our sample appeared to support this agenda, even being part of the public HE environment. This is not an insignificant figure, and, if new governance practices being employed contribute to professors' professional success, this number may increase. Without transparency and opportunity to debate the reforms, it is challenging for civil society to organize and defend their interest. Our findings suggest that most HE professors are against this agenda. Politicians and labor unions have significant work to do if they want to raise professors' awareness on this subject. One possibility is to publicize previous research findings about the HE reforms in developed countries, translating them into simpler and comprehensive materials.

## **Limitations**

This research also has some limitations. Our first limitation refers to the sample. Despite its relevance and size, we focused on only one public university. Future research should expand the sample to other public HE institutions in Brazil and include various geographic locations to investigate whether these findings hold across diverse samples. The second limitation is the cross-sectional nature of this study. We believe that longitudinal research may capture significant changes over time regarding faculty rationale. The third limitation is related to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which public universities in Brazil played a critical role in supporting local government facing challenges. These universities were the only facilities in Brazil equipped with laboratories, trained labor forces, and infrastructure (such as super freezers) capable of rapidly producing knowledge and facing the pandemic. Our assumption is that society in general might have changed its opinion about public universities, especially regarding efficiency. Future research may investigate if the professors' perceptions of the universities' social role changed due to the pandemic event. Finally, the fourth limitation is associated with the sample size and the survey method. Future research should increase the number of participants and include other colleges from the same university in the analysis. Future study may also conduct qualitative research to gain in-depth insights into how professors think about the proposed reforms.

## Conclusion

This research aimed to understand how the faculty body of a public HE institution in Brazil perceives the proposed educational reforms by assessing their perspectives on neoliberal values, the role of public HE, and university governance. The findings indicate that most professors who are not aligned with neoliberal values believe that the university has a critical role in promoting economic development and reducing social inequalities. They also advocate in favor of the university's freedom of thought, and governance. However, the concerning results pertain to professors aligned with neoliberal values, as they believe public HE should be run like a business. They are also willing to give away autonomy, governance, and resources.

## Author's Contribution

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