

# Higher Education: From the Medieval Era to the Challenges of Institutionalization in Brazil

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## Abstract

This article provides a panoramic analysis of the historical process of the emergence of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their role as mediators of medieval knowledge, which later also exerted significant influence as they reshaped themselves for the consolidation of national states and modern Western scientific culture. In Brazil, unlike the European context where universities have materialized in space for many centuries, we only find these higher education institutions beginning in the early 20th century. We must consider the time and space in which they are inserted from the moment of their emergence to the present period. We will highlight the spatial dimension of the process from the origins and evolution of these institutions. Studies indicate that in Brazil, only from the turn of the 21st century has there been a better distribution of HEIs across the territory, but their provision is still concentrated in two perspectives: the majority of enrollments are in private higher education, and spatially they are in larger cities.

**Keywords:** Brazil, higher education, historical process

## 1. Introduction

The diffusion of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Note 1) as significant events in the daily lives of places becomes an important theme for understanding the transformations that have occurred in Brazil. Therefore, we aim to identify, from a historical perspective, the origins of HEIs in the global context and subsequently focus on their manifestation in Brazil.

In this process, it is important to highlight how the diffusion of ideas and concepts occurred in places through the diffusion of this event (Note 2), as well as to identify the agents that stand out in the process of spatial selectivity engendered. HEIs, based on their logics produced in different contexts, bring new logics and contents to the places where they are inserted, altering pre-existing structures and dynamizing processes.

Thus, we understand that the phenomenon of the diffusion of higher education can only be understood through the apprehension of the socio-spatial processes that define the present historical period. When discussing periods, Santos and Silveira (2001) emphasize:

Períodos são pedaços de tempo definidos por características que interagem e asseguram o movimento do todo. Mas essa interação se faz segundo um controle que assegura uma reprodução ordenada das características gerais, isto é, segundo uma organização. É a falência desta última, açoitada por uma evolução mais brutal de um ou de diversos fatores, que desmantela a harmonia do conjunto, determina a ruptura e permite dizer que se entrou em um novo período (Santos and Silveira, 2001, p. 24).

We will trace back the origins of HEIs in the world and in Brazil, seeking to identify the various dimensions and interrelations that the diffusion process of this specific type of education entails.

The present article is structured into topics: the first deals with materials and methods, the second addresses the origin of the University, the third covers the resurgence of the University in the modern age, the fourth presents results and discussions concerning the elements involved in the genesis of Higher Education in Brazil, and lastly, the final considerations.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This article is part of reflections developed within the study group on the expansion of Higher Education in Brazil, under the Graduate Program in Geography at the State University of Vale do Acaraú. The research deals with secondary data available in the reports of the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP) and readings from authors who address the genesis of Higher Education and its development.

## 3. Tracing the Origin of the University: The Global Context

When we undertake a historical and geographical reconstruction of the development of higher education on an international scale, we must take into account the dynamics that other spheres (economic, social, political, and cultural) assume, helping us to assemble a comprehensive framework of the current context. Higher education receives influences and also influences other sectors of society, so it is of paramount importance that we recognize social changes on the world stage.

In Western culture, the University appears as a privileged locus for the dissemination of knowledge in its pure and applied aspects. Furthermore, it is the result of the urbanization process of the 10th and 11th centuries that occurred in Western Europe, as clarified by Castro (2014).

Thus, it is in European cities that the first Universities will be established, based on the social division of labor in the city: giving rise to the figure of the intellectual who simultaneously engaged in the activities of a professor and scholar.

A precursor being the University of Bologna in Italy, founded in 1088, considered the cradle of the Western university. In the subsequent years, the movement of creating universities was strengthened and became widespread across the European continent. According to Castro (2014), this process marked the beginning of the constitution of modernity, which:

[...] fundamentally due to the processes that began to threaten the feudal order and lay the foundations of modernity. These were processes related to the commercial and cultural renaissance, which gave other dynamics to medieval cities, opening the way for contestations of predetermined orders and for the movement of centralization of power by national monarchies, fundamental for commercial maritime expansion, considered the first expression of process of contemporary globalization (Castro, 2014, p. 46).

Jacques Le Goff (1998), in his renowned work “For Love of the Cities,” provides the context for the creation of universities within the space of medieval cities. The author emphasizes the importance that the university has for the urban space. Universities emerged in the context of urban revival in the 12th and 13th centuries, amidst the development of feudalism, alongside the opening of Mediterranean maritime trade. According to Ullmann (2000), it was through the urban revival and contact with the Eastern world that various knowledge was incorporated into some regions of Western Europe.

Thus, gradually in the 12th century, various faculties were created from these schools: Law, Theology, and Medicine, aimed at meeting the aspirations of society and the Church. The latter wanted to continue to exert its dominance over the forms of teaching of the time, believing that the path of institutionalization of the university was the way to go. For this purpose, only the Pontificate could grant the *licentia ubique docendi*, a document that formalized the birth of a university (Ullmann, 2000, p. 105).

Another author who contributed significantly to the understanding of the emergence of universities in medieval Europe was Verger (1990). In his work, “The Universities in the Middle Ages,” he highlights three distinct origins: universities of “spontaneous” emergence; universities driven by “migration” (teachers and students); and “created” universities.

In the first group, we have examples such as the University of Bologna—arising from schools of Law—and Paris—originating from schools of Philosophy and Theology, which developed from pre-existing schools. According to Verger (1990), these universities emerge from the aspirations of society at the time and the development of its social relations, attracting a growing number of teachers and students.

As universities born from the migration of students and teachers are associated with secession (Note 3) as an attempt to combat local authorities that centralized higher education in existing universities. Thus, many teachers and students left a place where they were established in search of other places where they could find more protection from local authorities. An example is the University of Cambridge, established after the migration of faculty and students from the University of Oxford, England.

The third group, referred to as “created” universities, includes those institutions that were founded by the Pope, the Emperor, or the King of a particular locality.

An important contribution to thinking about the relationship between the university and the city was proposed by Paula (2006), who stated, “the university, to the extent that it has consolidated as a space for free thinking, is a creation of the city, a result of the set of freedoms that cities claimed and built” (Paula, 2006, p. 38).

The city, therefore, as a possibility for the flourishing of collective identities stemming from the amplification of collective aspirations and demands, finds in the university an expression of what urban life is capable of. When undertaking a geographical reading of the phenomenon of the emergence of universities in medieval Europe, we cannot overlook the importance of the responsible agents (Church, teachers, students, King) and the places where they were established (the cities).

#### **4. The Renaissance, The Enlightenment, and the Creation of the Modern University**

Trindade (1998) provides us with an excellent contribution to understanding the temporal and spatial dimension of the university institution by dividing, for analytical purposes, into four distinct periods. The first period, from the 12th century to the Renaissance, is marked by the creation of the university in the midst of the Middle (Note 4) Ages. The second period, starting with the Renaissance, is characterized by the impacts that the commercial transformations of capitalism exert on universities.

As scientific discoveries in various fields of knowledge set the tone for the third period analyzed by the author, which begins in the 17th century, culminating with the Industrial Revolution that modifies the relationship between science and the university. Finally, a fourth period is presented starting from the institutionalization of the modern university in the 19th century and which has ramifications to the present day.

When examining the university during the Renaissance period, we highlight the changes that European society underwent from the 15th century onwards, which set the tone for the transition from the traditional to the modern university, a process that extended until the 19th century. These changes include the end of theological hegemony and the advent of anthropocentric humanism (Trindade, 1998).

Italy emerges as the epicenter of the Renaissance due to the high degree of urbanization of its cities. The republics of Venice and Florence, under the rule of the Medici and the Popes, are examples of this urban prosperity. The universities that developed during this period and were important in the transition between the end of theological hegemony and the advent of humanism were the universities of Florence, Rome, and Naples, in addition to the Neoplatonic Academy (Trindade, 1998, p. 8).

Another important element for the change in the profile of university (Note 5) institutions was the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, responsible for bringing about a radical religious divide among universities. The 17th century brought with it great discoveries and revolutions, especially in the fields of physics, astronomy, and mathematics. In the 18th century, there were advancements in chemistry and the natural sciences. The transition between these two centuries modified the relationship between the university and science, leading to the founding of the first scientific chairs, as well as the first observatories, botanical gardens, museums, and scientific laboratories.

According to Trindade (1998), the modern university is engendered from a societal context strongly influenced by the development of sciences, Enlightenment, and Encyclopedism, which, in the political and social sphere, will find its bedrock in the radical effects of the 1789 Revolution, both within and outside France. It is worth noting that the universities born or reorganized in this context do not follow a single pattern, depending largely on the relations they maintain with the State.

Thus, the idea of the modern state or public university is founded on the inseparability of knowledge, teaching, and research as its fundamental pillars. This model will influence the dynamics of universities in Europe and other parts of the Western world. Therefore, the conception of the university associated with the fundamental idea of higher education is a specifically Western creation.

In the present day, many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in our view have a narrower scope than universities because they often do not structure themselves for the production of science and are limited to the transmission of ready-made knowledge. What makes them dynamic is not necessarily their connection with science, but rather with professional training.

#### **5. Results and Discussions**

Introducing the genesis of the Higher Education system in Brazil is a complex task, given the diversity in its structure and organization. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the economic, social, political, and cultural factors that directly affect the creation and dissemination of these institutions. From their origins in medieval Europe to the present day, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are complex structures that have deserved attention

from researchers in various fields of knowledge.

Higher education in Brazil must be discussed based on the scenario and context in which it arises, that is, time and space must be present in analyzes of this phenomenon. Brazil is located in Latin America, inequality rates on this continent are high in several aspects: income distribution, access to healthcare, expenditure on consumer goods and services, and especially access to education. In this context, HEIs have an important role, because as they are the locus par excellence of knowledge production, they can act as mitigators of social inequality.

Some scholars of the History of Education in Brazil claim that the first experiences related to higher education date back to the founding movement of Jesuit Colleges and other religious orders in the 15th and 16th centuries. The arguments used are that the teaching practiced in these places would be equivalent to that of universities present in other contexts, especially in the Spanish colonies in America. Cunha (1980) in his book *A Universidade Temporã* questions the absence of HEIs in Brazil, comparing them to their neighbors colonized by Spain. Fávero (2006) attests that:

From the outset, the Portuguese Crown was denied to the Jesuits who, back in the 16th century, tried to create it in the Colony. As a result, students graduating from Jesuit schools went to the University of Coimbra or other European universities in order to complete their studies (Fávero, 2006, p. 20).

These authors highlight that there were some internal movements in Brazil that advocated for the creation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Oliven (1990) points out that during the period of the Minas Gerais Conspiracy, there was an idealization of a university for the country. However, these attempts were not successful mainly due to the dependency relationship that the Brazilian colony maintained with Portugal.

Thus, it was only in 1808, with the arrival of the Portuguese Royal Family to Brazil, that we witnessed the first impulse towards formalizing higher education in our country. At that time, isolated colleges were established in various parts of the national territory.

Data indicates a primacy of the Southeast region regarding the concentration of HEIs in Brazil, especially because Rio de Janeiro, the capital of the country at that time, was located in this region. Santos and Silveira (2000) already highlight this fact by reporting that out of 6,735 enrollments in Brazilian higher education, conducted in 1908, 45.61% were concentrated in Rio de Janeiro (Amorim, 2010, p. 121). Throughout the 20th century, the expansion of public higher education occurred slowly and did not keep pace with private offerings.

Only in the last decade of the 20th century did an expansion of HEIs occur, and this phenomenon intensified during the government of Luís Inacio Lula da Silva from 2003 onwards. We can see that this growth is expressed by the quantitative increase in the number of institutions and higher education courses.

The origin of the university in the country is considered recent because it dates back to the early decades of the 20th century. In the context of national integration with the country's industrial growth, the first universities began to emerge in Brazil (see Table 1). We emphasize that through the country's development plans, the integration of the economy and territory became possible.

Table 1. First Universities and year of creation

University	Year of Creation
University of Rio de Janeiro	1920
University of Minas Gerais	1927
Technical University of Rio Grande do Sul	1932
University of São Paulo	1934
University of Distrito Federal	1935–1939

Source: Barreyro, 2008.

The Center-South of Brazil, led by São Paulo, sees its hegemony grow in comparison to other regions of the country, and the creation of universities follows this trend, with the rise of Rio de Janeiro and subsequently São Paulo as the most important university centers in the country.

We emphasize that the emergence and increase of educational policies in Brazil, especially those focused on higher education, are strongly connected to the development of productive forces, the new characteristics that modern society acquires, and the role of the State as an inducer of these transformations.

The period corresponding to the first government of the Vargas Era (1930–1945) saw an increase in private institutions (mainly denominational institutions), while in the public sector, there was a greater process of control

by the State. It was during this time that the University of São Paulo—USP (1934) and the University of the Federal District—UDF (1935) were created.

The reform that higher education underwent during the Vargas Era was characterized by an ambiguous conservatism and a relative opening of access to higher education. The latter was characterized by the increase in the offering of higher education courses by HEIs, which led to the growth of the number of students from the “middle classes” of society.

The decades from 1940 to 1960 were marked by the crystallization of the university model, and the central government federalized some HEIs that were previously state-owned. The Church strengthened its role with the creation of Catholic universities in various regions of the country.

HEIs are increasingly drivers of local/regional economies where they are located (expanding to their surroundings) through job creation and income generation, contributing to the growth and development of cities.

There is a growing societal demand for specialization driven by the requirements of a more competitive job market that seeks qualified labor. This is due to the adoption of more modern forms of production, based on technology, which require new educational competencies to perform activities.

This is what Santos and Silveira (2000) point out as a true conquest of Brazilian territory by HEIs. There is a geographical diffusion of higher education in the country, occurring more rapidly and intensively in the South and Southeast regions.

An analysis of the number of undergraduate courses offered by the administrative category of HEIs for the year 2020 shows that 66% are in private HEIs. This situation is consistent with the fact that 87.4% of HEIs in the country belong to the private sector. However, the public sector, which holds only 12.6% of HEIs in the country, is characterized as the network of education with larger institutions, concentrating 34% of the undergraduate courses offered.

The location situation of HEIs, as presented by the 2020 Higher Education Census, shows that the majority are located in municipalities outside the capital cities of the country (65.0%). This situation does not occur uniformly across all geographical regions of the country. The South (74.3% in the interior) and Southeast (73.7% in the interior) regions, due to their concentration of the highest number of HEIs in the country, set the national trend. In the Midwest (51.3% in the interior) and Northeast (49.8% in the interior) regions, the distribution of HEI locations is equivalent when comparing capital cities and the interior. However, in the North region (38.3% in the interior), the majority of HEIs are located in the capital cities, marking a distinct pattern. (MEC/INEP)

There are still significant gaps in the distribution of HEIs in the Brazilian territory, especially in the North and Midwest regions. Currently, with the increasing urbanization of interior regions in Brazil, the concentration of HEIs in certain areas becomes problematic, as many high school graduates have to travel long distances to access higher education.

Data from IBGE demonstrate that in the states comprising the Northern region of Brazil and the state of Mato Grosso, students face an average distance of over 100 km to attend higher education. This distance is much greater compared to the states in the Center-South, where students travel an average of 25 to 45 km to access higher education courses.

Long commuting flows are also found in Northeastern states, where the number of medium-sized cities is still rare throughout the territory. This phenomenon contributes to the generalization of investments in distance education, which has been gaining strength in our country in recent years.

We emphasize that the presence of HEIs in states and regions does not occur randomly, but is the result of a process involving different actors and interests (State and Market) in territorial management. By analyzing the territorial dynamics of higher education in Brazil, we understand how this variable becomes relevant to comprehend the socio-economic and structural changes that the Brazilian territory has been undergoing in recent years.

Regarding the interiorization of higher education, we observe that it occurs more intensely in the states of the Midwest, South, and Southeast. In the Northeast, we find a concentration of HEIs in the capitals of this region, but the process of interiorization of higher education is already underway, albeit in a punctual manner, especially in the states of Bahia, Pernambuco, Ceará, and Maranhão (Table 2).

Table 2. HIGHLIGHTS OF HEIS BY GEOGRAPHIC REGION (Note 6)

GEOGRAPHIC REGION	General features
<b>NORTH</b>	Predominance of undergraduate courses in the general Education field (38.12%). Highest percentage of enrollments in courses in the field of Social Sciences, Business, and Law (31.8%), followed by courses in the Education field (28.1%). Highest number of enrollments in face-to-face undergraduate courses at public universities (39.6%), followed by private colleges (36.9%). Predominance of institutions located in the capital (61.7%).
<b>NORTH EAST</b>	Predominance of undergraduate courses in the general Education field (34.75%). Highest percentage of enrollments in courses in the field of Social Sciences, Business, and Law (37.8%), followed by courses in the Education field (20.8%). Highest number of enrollments in face-to-face undergraduate courses at private colleges (39.3%), followed by public universities (36.7%). Predominance of institutions located in the capital (50.2%).
<b>SOUTHEAST</b>	Predominance of undergraduate courses in the general field of Social Sciences, Business, and Law (31.36%) - which also have the highest percentage of enrollments (41.8%) - followed by courses in the field of Health and Social Well-being (13.3%). Highest number of enrollments in face-to-face undergraduate courses at private universities (35.2%), followed by private colleges (27.8%). Predominance of institutions located in the interior (73.7%).
<b>SOUTH</b>	Predominance of undergraduate courses in the general field of Social Sciences, Business, and Law (30.35%) - which also have the highest percentage of enrollments (43.6%) - followed by courses in the field of Engineering, Production, and Construction (15.6%). Higher number of enrollments in face-to-face undergraduate courses at public universities (31.1%), followed by private universities (29.5%). Predominance of institutions located in the interior (74.3%).
<b>CENTRAL-WEST</b>	Predominance of undergraduate courses in the general field of Social Sciences, Business, and Law (30.69%) - which also have the highest percentage of enrollments (43.9%) - followed by courses in the field of Education (16.1%). Higher number of enrollments in face-to-face undergraduate courses at private colleges (36.1%), followed by public universities (24.1%). Predominance of institutions located in the interior (51.3%).

This process of (re)localization of HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) reflects a dual movement occurring in the interiorization of Brazilian higher education. Firstly, the state, in an attempt to provide essential services for social development, allocates publicly-funded investments in various regions of the territory. In contrast, the possibility for educational companies to profit from exploiting this market drives these institutions to grow rapidly and reach even the most remote areas of Brazil.

Furthermore, medium-sized cities emerge as important nodes for the dissemination of HEIs, demonstrating a significant process of interiorization of higher education. This process is still ongoing and requires deeper investigation into the ongoing transformations in these cities, coupled with the expansion of HEIs.

It is extremely relevant to consider the phenomenon of expansion of both public and private higher education in our country, and to note that this process is relatively new, thus its effects must be carefully analyzed. Within the growth of HEIs, we also have the expansion of Federal Institutes of Technological Education, which focus on training technologists in various fields of expertise.

Additionally, HEIs contribute to urban and regional economic development by dynamizing cities, their economic bases, morphologies, and even their configurations in the urban network to which they belong.

## 6. Final Considerations

University institutions can be considered as the most enduring constructions of modern society. With their central characteristic of knowledge production and dissemination, they were created in various forms: managed as corporations of teachers and students, or later under state control, universities are important institutions that have played and continue to play a significant role in our society.

In Brazil, although HEIs were born late, in the last two decades there has been an expansion of HEIs throughout the national territory, but still following a logic of selectivity that only incorporates portions of the national space.

Analyzing the growth in the number of enrollments in Brazilian higher education, which in the late 1960s totaled just over 278,000, reached over 8 million enrolled students by 2020. These data reflect the current society's need to appropriate technical and organizational knowledge.

As the logic of HEI expansion is territorially unequal, only a few places are chosen for the implementation of these

institutions, which denotes a process of spatial selectivity. The places selected in this logic are increasingly endowed with technical densities incorporated into the territory for better circulation of ideas and information. The intensity and expansion of technical densities are responsible for the fragmentation of the territory and the inequality between places.

We have constructed a narrative here that seeks to narrate how universities can be responsible for propagating development. This is an issue that still requires efforts to be explained. What we can conceive is that based on the consulted bibliography and analyzed data, it is possible to infer the significant importance that higher education assumes in our country.

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## Notes

Note 1. Throughout the text, the acronym HEIs will be used to refer to Higher Education Institutions. This term is given to institutions that provide higher education, such as universities, colleges, schools, institutes, and technological education centers. According to the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (LDB nº 9.394/96), institutions are classified into administrative categories: public and private..

Note 2. The event we are addressing, namely the diffusion of HEIs, becomes relevant as we can articulate it with the recent characteristics of Brazilian urbanization and the recent dynamism of medium-sized cities. In this perspective, we corroborate with Santos (2005) for whom “the event is inscribed in the characteristic totality of a certain moment, but it does so as part of the whole” (Santos, 2005, p. 160).

Note 3. Here, we use the term “secession” (derived from the Latin term “secessio”) to mean the act of withdrawing from an organization, union, or especially a political entity.

Note 4. We have already discussed this period in the previous section. It is worth noting that the model of the university created during this time was considered traditional, with the University of Bologna and Paris being its main representatives. From these experiences, the diffusion of institutions under the dominion of the Roman Church spread throughout the European territory.

Note 5. Trindade (1988) highlights that not all institutions were affected by humanism. This trend did not reach the University of Paris with the same intensity, as it remained faithful to its origins.

Note 6. Prepared based on the 2020 Higher Education Census.



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