

The Role of Academic Capital in Reducing Social Asymmetries in Brazilian Universities

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Abstract

Brazil is characterised by pronounced social inequality, historically marked by discrimination on the grounds of race, class and gender, which restricts equitable social mobility and can partly be explained by the exclusion of poorer segments of the population from higher education. To address these asymmetries, affirmative action policies reserve places for students from public schools. Recent studies analysing the impact of quotas on graduates' performance have demonstrated the policy's effectiveness in driving social mobility among quota beneficiaries. Nevertheless, certain differences persist, particularly those stemming from families' cultural and economic backgrounds. To bridge these gaps, institutional policies developed within universities, such as extracurricular activities, may serve as an important mechanism for reducing these asymmetries by creating what we refer to here as academic capital. Experiences gained through extracurricular activities — such as research, cultural and sporting activities, student enterprise programme, language courses, student representation and others — can promote significant changes in personal life and social inclusion, especially for students from low-income backgrounds (Carvalho Junior et al., 2024; Winkler & Sriram, 2015). As a result of this process, the formation of academic capital may affect various spheres of a student's life, including the development of technical skills and competencies, language acquisition, soft skills, and self-esteem. This represents a fertile, still underexplored field in the literature; therefore, in this theoretical essay, we seek to develop the concept of academic capital and propose hypotheses for future research.

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Introduction

Brazil is characterised by significant social inequality, which has historically been compounded by discrimination on the grounds of race, class and gender, thereby limiting equitable social mobility. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report published in 2018 indicates that it would take nine generations for those in the bottom 10 per cent of the country's income bracket to reach the same income level as the Brazilian middle class (OECD, 2018). This stagnation affects, above all, those who lack access to higher education, whose earnings are up to four times lower than those of graduates of Brazilian universities. From a historical perspective, access to higher education has remained out of reach for the poorest sections of society, mainly due to the lack of equitable conditions.

In contrast, at the federal level, from 2012 onwards, affirmative action policies aimed to guarantee places in undergraduate courses at federal universities to enhance the social mobility of graduates and thereby reduce inequalities, pursuant to Law 12.711. Affirmative action measures were strengthened in 2023 with the entry into force of Law 14,723, which, in addition to changes to the allocation of places for undergraduate programmes, stipulates that *stricto sensu* postgraduate programmes must reserve quotas for ethnic and racial groups and for people with disabilities (Carvalho Junior et al., 2024).

Recent studies have shown that quota policies have contributed to the social mobility of graduates admitted under these quotas, almost all of whom are Black and/or from socially vulnerable families (Biazotto et al., 2022; Carvalho Junior et al., 2024; Ding et al., 2017; Duryea et al., 2019; Herskovic & Ramos, 2017). These findings reinforce the potential for equity offered by quotas, which also stems from the fact that students admitted under the quota system perform very similarly to those admitted through open competition, thereby countering speculative arguments regarding an alleged decline in university quality following the introduction of affirmative action (Silva et al., 2015). Furthermore, dropout rates among quota students have been significantly lower than those of non-quota students (Neves, 2017).

Despite the aforementioned impacts of the quota policy, structural factors characterised by class, race and gender lead to various forms of discrimination in the labour market, limiting the social mobility of these graduates and the prospects for greater pay equity. Racial, class and gender markers have a significant impact on income inequality in Brazil, resulting from the structural nature of classism, racism and sexism present in society, which manifest themselves in various ways. Recent studies show that differences persist among higher education graduates (Carvalho Junior et al., 2024; Vieira & Arends-Kuenning, 2019).

Markers such as race and class share a common background. The concept of capital developed by Bourdieu (1986), now well-established in the social sciences, suggests that we inherit from our parents an endowment that directly influences an individual's mastery of forms of capital, such as economic, social and cultural capital. The latter is of particular interest to us, as studies show that individuals with greater cultural capital tend to have higher levels of formal education, higher-status occupations, and higher incomes (Flemmen, 2012; Friedman et al., 2015; Koppman, 2016). This capital, in addition to enabling the instrumental mastery of knowledge important in academic life, helps students feel a sense of belonging at university by fostering an understanding of the rules, codes, performance expectations, and other idiosyncrasies common to these environments (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014).

Against this backdrop, it is indisputable that, in addition to ensuring admission through quota schemes and retention through student support programmes (Brandão & Campos, 2020), it has become essential to consider how to bridge the gap caused by differing levels of cultural capital, above all to promote equity amongst the various groups of university entrants. In this regard, universities' extracurricular training programmes have played an important role by offering students the opportunity to participate in outreach projects, teaching, research, academic societies, and work placements. These activities are characterised as academic capital, derived from the aforementioned set of experiences (Carvalho Junior et al., 2024; Winkler & Sriram, 2015).

This academic capital plays a dual role. On the one hand, it complements students' technical training by enabling them to gain professional experience in outreach, research, and/or teaching. Furthermore, it supports the development of soft skills by requiring students to demonstrate teamwork, communication skills and other abilities (Christie et al., 2018).

Against this backdrop, this theoretical essay aims to develop the concept of academic capital and propose hypotheses for future research. Understanding the formation of academic capital enables the development of a more appropriate theoretical framework, both in relation to institutional factors – such as teaching, research and outreach programmes – and to student engagement policies, as well as the impact that this capital has on different aspects of the lives of students from under-represented groups.

Inequality and Access to Universities in Brazil

In a 2023 OECD report, the data indicate that the generational cycle of poverty in Brazil spanned nine generations (Carvalho Junior, 2024). Against this backdrop, affirmative action policies in higher education aimed at low-income groups are all the more relevant, given their effectiveness in breaking the generational cycle of poverty and improving the economic and social well-being of this population (Ding et al., 2017; Herskovic & Ramos, 2017; Reiter & Lezama, 2013). Some recent evidence from Brazil suggests that public universities play a key role in promoting the social mobility of poor students who benefit from the quota policy (Biazotto et al., 2022; Duryea et al., 2019; Francis-Tan & Tannuri-Pianto, 2018).

Recent data from the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) indicate that, despite modest progress, educational inequality between Black (black or mixed-race) and white individuals remains significant. Among white people aged 15 to 59, the illiteracy rate is 3.2 per cent, whilst among Black people it stands at 7.1 per cent. When comparing individuals aged 60 or over, we find that 8.6 per cent of white people are illiterate, compared with 22.7 per cent of black citizens (IBGE, 2024). We can therefore state that one in four black adults in Brazil has illiterate parents.

Part of the reason for the persistence of this inequality stems from access to higher education, which has historically been difficult for the most vulnerable sections of society to attain. Against this backdrop, we can view the quota policy in higher education not only as a form of historical redress, but also as a mechanism for breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty, given that access to higher education increases the income of graduates and their families (Ding et al., 2017; Reiter & Lezama, 2013).

In Brazil, several studies demonstrate this effect of quotas on the social mobility of graduates benefiting from this affirmative action (Duryea et al., 2019; Francis-Tan & Tannuri-Pianto,

2018; Guimarães et al., 2019), thereby ensuring a lower level of income inequality between groups, given that some studies indicate no significant differences between quota and non-quota graduates upon entering the labour market (Biazotto et al., 2022). On the other hand, international studies indicate a wage gap between students from socially vulnerable families and those from middle-class backgrounds, even when they are graduates of universities with the same academic prestige (Thompson, 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2021).

At postgraduate level, these disparities are even more pronounced. According to a study conducted by the Brazilian Black Science League, based on data from CNPq's Lattes platform, 82.7 per cent of postgraduate students are white, whilst the proportion of Black students is 12.75 per cent (Santos, 2024). In addition, 8.69 per cent of research productivity grants awarded by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) between 2005 and 2022 were awarded to Black researchers (CNPq, 2023).

According to Raftery and Hout (1993), as inequality of access is reduced at one level of education, that same inequality extends to the next level of formal education, particularly in terms of status (Teichler, 2017). In this regard, the historical inequality in access to undergraduate education may carry over to the next level of study. Consequently, there is also a need for a quota policy at the postgraduate level to alter the composition of teaching staff at higher education institutions and, by extension, the very status quo of academia that reinforces its "whitewashed" ethos.

Carvalho (2002) points out that much of the discourse that denied racial inequality and contributed to the fallacy of racial democracy was developed by researchers within the universities themselves. This denial, amongst other effects, substantially discouraged the dissemination of anti-racist arguments (Carvalho, 2002). Carneiro (2005) points out that the racial hierarchy characteristic of epistemic racism denies the rationality of the other's existence, which renders the debate highly sanitised, reducing all rationality grounded in traditional knowledge to something stereotypical (Dias, 2007).

Cordeiro et al. (2019) argue that the admission of Black people to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes may represent a clash between two bodies of knowledge. On the one hand, the formal body of knowledge, grounded in the established principles of science. On the other hand, forms of knowledge that demand recognition and validity are often marginalised. Affirmative action in postgraduate education "holds out the prospect of deconstructing the universal and natural character of the knowledge produced at the university" (Cordeiro et al., 2019, p. 118), calling into question various theoretical and methodological assumptions that lend legitimacy to the knowledge produced.

The inclusion of Black students in postgraduate programmes – and this appears to extend to low-income students – does not seem to be a simple, immediate response to a legal measure such as quotas. Carvalho (2005) argues that the competitiveness inherent in postgraduate study requires criteria that go beyond academic qualifications. These criteria must align with the symbolic capital accumulated by postgraduate programmes, which represents a particular social class. For years, this expectation of performance has led the few who have managed to break through the glass ceiling in university research and teaching to do so without renouncing their lived experiences or adopting an ethic and a discourse belonging to a historically white intellectual elite (Bernardino-Costa & Borges, 2021).

The entry of historically marginalised students into postgraduate study indicates changes across various spheres. Mirroring the situation at the undergraduate level, access to Master's and PhD programmes implies social mobility (Duryea et al., 2019; Francis-Tan & Tannuri-Pianto, 2018). Beyond this impact, further evidence points to positive outcomes in professional.

integration within the field of study, continuation of postgraduate studies, behavioural change, increased self-esteem, future career prospects, and personal/professional satisfaction, particularly among Black and low-income students admitted under affirmative action schemes (Barros, 2019).

A significant effect of this process is an increased likelihood that Black academics and representatives of other minority groups will teach at universities. Silva et al. (2015) discuss this process of representation and highlight the need for Black people to be represented in society. This representation stems from the recognition of an individual's identity within a group and of a group's identity within society at large. Hall et al. (2014) present identity as a symbolic marker endowed with the power to foster identification and to highlight differences between individuals or groups.

Capital and Its Effects on the Lives of Graduates

The impact of affirmative action in reducing inequality through access to higher education in Brazil is consistent with evidence from similar policies in other countries, such as the United States, where improvements in educational opportunities and positive impacts on the labour market for the beneficiary group have been observed (Holzer & Neumark, 2006), since the presence of minority groups in high-quality universities reduces the importance of family social capital for their entry into the labour market.

Despite this positive impact, the economic, cultural, and social legacies of middle-class families affect the labour market and academic life (Koppman, 2016). In a study of recruiters from private companies in Rio de Janeiro responsible for hiring recent graduates, Lemos and Pinto (2008) found that the most decisive factors in candidate selection were not technical skills, but rather behavioural traits, life experiences, and the prestige of the institution attended. This picture is complemented by a preference for candidates with experience abroad, proficiency in languages and the arts – findings similar to those observed in countries such as South Korea (Choi, 2015) and France (Hartmann, 2000).

These results can be explained by the concept of cultural capital developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for whom the formation of this capital stems from a set of experiences shaped within the family structure through access to reading, music, works of art, language learning and travel. These experiences take concrete form in the habitus, generating a set of mental and behavioural predispositions that collectively unite and distinguish groups of individuals (Bourdieu, 1986). One of the consequences of the accumulation of this capital is the opening up of better opportunities in the labour market (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014), which directly impact the type of occupation and remuneration of those who accumulate more cultural capital, with this effect being most pronounced when analysing the highest salary brackets (Carvalho Junior et al., 2024).

Another relevant factor in employability, career progression and remuneration is the set of relationships that individuals inherit from their family's social networks, as well as those they form within their social circles. This is particularly true in Brazil, where patrimonialism and

personalism remain hallmarks of society (Schappo, 2018). Bourdieu (2003) defines this force – which derives from a network of relationships and can confer advantages on individuals – as social capital. This type of capital is closely linked to economic and cultural capital, with the three feeding into one another.

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is a set of potential and actual resources established, maintained and reproduced by an individual through a network of contacts with other individuals (a group) which guarantees them “credentials” for access that are socially accepted amongst them, such as, for example, privileged access to the labour market. Bourdieu (1986) explains that social capital depends both on the size of an individual’s network of personal contacts and on the set of capitals (cultural, economic and symbolic) possessed by those to whom the individual is connected. Higher education students from low-income families lack social capital compared with students from more privileged backgrounds (Watson, 2013), and this lower level of relevant social capital may negatively affect their opportunities in the labour market, as highlighted by various studies in Brazil and abroad (Lehmann, 2019; Ma & Savas, 2014).

Due to the interrelationship between different forms of capital, social capital has a strong influence on the positions individuals occupy in the labour market, as well as on their earnings – an effect found in studies conducted in various countries (Brunello & Cappellari, 2008; Lehmann, 2019; Ma & Savas, 2014).

Research shows that the impact of social capital manifests itself in various ways; for example, socially vulnerable students have low expectations of securing a good position in the labour market because they are aware that they lack the necessary social capital (Silva et al., 2015). Consequently, one’s network of relationships affects income, with graduates possessing lower levels of social capital earning less (Guimarães et al., 2019).

When considering higher-education graduates, as in this study, two sources of this social capital can be identified: the family, in its traditional sense, and the university environment itself. In investigating the effect of social capital derived from these two sources, Carvalho Junior et al. (2023) found that the social networks formed within the family do not influence earnings. The effect of social capital on remuneration stems from the relationships formed at university, meaning that individuals with greater social capital acquired in this context are 10.8% to 13.1% more likely to secure occupations of greater social prestige (Carvalho Junior et al., 2023).

Academic Capital as a Turning Point

The development of cultural and social capitals through the university experience appears to be just one of the countless outcomes of access to higher education. Recent studies have highlighted the development of a compensatory mechanism facilitated by access to universities. Attendance at university, for example, can increase students’ motivation (Anelli, 2020). This environment can be conducive to the formation of academic capital, represented by participation in extracurricular activities at university, which promote significant changes in personal life and social inclusion, especially for low-income students (Carvalho Junior et al., 2024; Winkler & Sriram, 2015).

It should be emphasised that the concept of academic capital employed in this proposal differs from that developed in other studies which link the term to an externality generated by universities through their productive capacity (Espín et al., 2017; Robles & Rohán, 2020), or

even the concept of human capital, which regards educational attainment as a factor in economic development (Schultz, 1964).

The concept of academic capital is discussed by Trammell (2019), who defines it as “the transactional value of a relationship based on associations and social knowledge”. Our theoretical perspective focuses on academic capital arising from extracurricular activities provided by Brazilian universities, such as undergraduate research and tutorial programmes, scholarship programmes, faculty encouragement of research, language courses, tutorial education programmes, academic rep, junior enterprise, and the promotion of cultural and leisure activities. Engagement in these activities may enable students acquiring or improving skills related to teamwork (Brungardt, 2011; Hordósy et al., 2018); Adaptability, communication, coordination, decision making, interpersonal skills and leadership (Brungardt, 2011; O’Neil *et al.*, 1999); Self-fulfilment, self-confidence and satisfaction (Profiroiu & Pacesila, 2017); Engagement, based on students’ behavioural, emotional and cognitive connection to their learning (Fredericks et al., 2004); Well-being promoted by academic motivation and enjoyment (Gavala & Flett, 2005).

Academic capital encompasses elements of the latter, as it directly addresses issues relating to the labour market, as developing technical and analytic skills, but it goes beyond this aspect by focusing on gaps resulting from a disadvantaged economic background, which has a tangible impact – as in the case of technical skills and abilities, such as language learning – and, above all, on the human aspect of the student, such as the development of soft skills, self-esteem, sociability and other qualities.

This is a fertile yet largely unexplored field in the literature, which, to a certain extent, lends the topic an exploratory nature. Recent studies show that the main source of academic capital lies in the extracurricular academic activities offered to students, in the areas of teaching, research and/or outreach, as well as participation in junior enterprises, sports clubs, academic exchange programmes, language courses, cultural activity groups, temporary projects and other activities.

In a recent study conducted with graduates from 28 federal universities, Carvalho Junior et al. (2024) found that the opportunities provided by universities significantly broaden students’ horizons and the networks of relationships formed through these activities. The contributions of the experiences reported by quota students are regarded by many as a watershed moment, particularly because of the critical thinking skills the university has fostered in its graduates (Carvalho Junior et al., 2025). They have a direct impact on students’ ability to understand reality, as is the case with those who take part in undergraduate research activities, and they also provide opportunities to bridge a gap caused by disparities in cultural capital, as is the case with those who have taken part in exchange programmes (Carvalho Junior et al., 2024).

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

This theoretical essay aims to develop the concept of academic capital and propose hypotheses for future research. Although affirmative action policies guarantee a proportion of reserved places for disadvantaged students, we contend that inequalities in economic, cultural, and social capital may impact not only students’ educational trajectories but also their professional trajectories within the labour market.

Our theoretical framework posits that what we term *academic capital* – developed throughout undergraduate study through student engagement in a range of extracurricular activities – may serve to narrow the gaps originating from family background. This process enables students to cultivate not only technical and analytical skills, but also critical thinking, socio-emotional abilities, communication skills, self-confidence, proactivity, teamwork, decision-making capabilities, and related competencies.

In light of this hypothesis, we present several questions that could be addressed in future research, among which we highlight the following:

- Does the accumulated academic capital have the potential to compensate for the absence of cultural capital?
- How does each ECA contribute to the accumulation of academic capital?
- What is the relative importance of academic capital and its dimensions across different professions?
- What are the effects of academic capital on reducing higher education dropout rates?
- What are the effects of academic capital on the employability, income and career progression of graduates?
- How do the aforementioned issues manifest when considering differences in gender, race/ethnicity and social class?

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