

# **What Do We Know About Quotas? Data and Considerations About the Implementation of the Quota System in the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ)<sup>1</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup>This article presents some of the results of the fieldwork research in the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), where I am carrying out a qualitative and quantitative study of the quota system.

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## **What Do We Know About Quotas? Data and Considerations About the Implementation of the Quota System in the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ)**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses statistical data about the implementation of the quota system in the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). In spite of the huge national debate about the legal foundations of quotas, little attention has been paid to the way quotas actually work where the system has been implemented. Against expectations, figures suggest that quota students perform similarly to other students and show lower dropping out rates. In addition to this, UERJ starts developing a new identity around the fact that quotas diversify the pool of students and mix people of different social and racial background. However, the percentage of quota students enrolling every year in academic courses has constantly decreased since quotas were introduced in 2003. Reasons for this phenomenon have been hardly explored and are presented as hypotheses due to the lack of research and the difficult access to the pool of statistical data hold by the University.

**Key words:** quota system, academic opportunities, policies of affirmative actions public state university, social disadvantage.

**Key words plus:** Brasil, educación pública, raza, discriminación.

## **¿Que sabemos sobre las cuotas? Datos y consideraciones sobre la implementación del sistema de cuotas en la Universidad del Estado de Rio de Janeiro (UERJ)**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo discute las estadísticas sobre la implementación del sistema de cuotas en la Universidad Estatal de Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). A pesar del amplio debate alrededor de los fundamentos legales de las cuotas, se ha prestado poca atención a la forma en que efectivamente funciona este sistema en aquellos espacios en que ha sido implementado. Contrario a las expectativas, las cifras sugieren que los estudiantes beneficiados por las cuotas se desempeñan de manera similar a los demás estudiantes y muestran tasas menores de deserción. Adicionalmente, UERJ comenzó a desarrollar una nueva identidad en torno al hecho de que las cuotas han diversificado el cuerpo estudiantil y mezclado personas de distinta procedencia racial y social. Sin embargo, el porcentaje de estudiantes de cuota que se inscriben cada año en los cursos ha decrecido constantemente desde que el sistema fue introducido en el 2003. Las razones que explican este fenómeno han sido apenas exploradas y son presentadas como hipótesis a causa de la ausencia de investigaciones y del difícil acceso a la base de datos estadísticos de la universidad.

**Palabras clave:** sistema de cuotas, políticas de acción afirmativa oportunidades académicas, universidad pública estatal, desventajas sociales.

**Palabras clave descriptores:** Brazil, public education, race, discrimination.

## **O que sabemos sobre as cotas? Informação e considerações sobre a implementação do sistema de cotas na Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ)**

### **Resumo**

Este artigo discute as estatísticas sobre a implementação do sistema de cotas na Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). Embora o amplo debate ao redor dos fundamentos legais das cotas, tem-se dado pouca atenção à forma como

efetivamente funciona este sistema naqueles espaços que tem sido implementado. Contra as expectativas, as cifras sugerem que os estudantes beneficiados pelas cotas se desempenham de uma maneira similar aos demais estudantes e mostram taxas menores de deserção. Adicionalmente, a UERJ começou a desenvolver uma nova identidade estudantil em torno ao fato das cotas terem diversificado o corpo estudantil e misturado pessoas de diferente procedência racial e social. No entanto, a porcentagem de estudantes de cotas que se inscrevem a cada ano nos cursos tem decrescido constantemente desde que o sistema foi introduzido em 2003. As razões que explicam este fenômeno tem sido pouco exploradas e são apresentadas como hipóteses a causa da ausência de pesquisas e do difícil acesso à base de dados estatísticos da universidade.

**Palavras chave:** sistema de cotas, políticas de ação afirmativa, oportunidades acadêmicas, universidade pública estatal, desvantagens sociais.

From 2003 policies of affirmative actions have been implemented in public state universities in the State of Rio de Janeiro. Such policies aim to guarantee the access of economically and socially disadvantaged students to public university. As shown by Rosenberg (2004:65-74), Brazil represents a social paradox where only wealthier students have traditionally had access to free university education, a very good one in this country. Such students, who usually come from private expensive colleges, would have more chances to pass the university access exam – *vestibular* - than people belonging to deprived groups. Socially disadvantaged students often have the only option of attending broke public colleges and would be not competitive to dispute the limited number of posts offered by the University.

Nowadays, the state law in Rio de Janeiro establishes that public state universities reserve 20% of posts to “black” (negros) students, 20% to students coming from public schools, and 5% to students who are “native Indians” (indígenas) or “disabled”<sup>3</sup>. Considering that federal Brazilian legislation has still not regulated the matter, only state universities are compelled to apply the quota system in the State of Rio de Janeiro. Universities depending on federal legislation can by contrast decide whether they apply the system or not, according to the principle of University autonomy<sup>4</sup>.

The access of quota students to public universities in the state of Rio de Janeiro is not automatic. In order to be classified, candidates are presently requested to pass a first assessment and score a minimum overall mark (20 points over a maximum of 100) between the first and the second assessment, a multiple choice test and a discursive exam. In case students gathered the 20 points and did not scored zero in the second assessment, their access to University will depend on the

<sup>3</sup> Only recently, in 2007, this last category also benefits “sons and daughters of policemen, firemen and prison security workers died in service”.

<sup>4</sup> Such a principle has been questioned in January 2008 by the suspension of the quota system in the Federal University of Santa Catarina (FUSC) by the Federal Court of the State of Santa Catarina. The Court considered the quota system ‘unconstitutional’ by infringing the ‘equality’ principle contained in art. 5 of the Brazilian Constitution.

rank obtained. The quota system also foresees socio-economic criteria by establishing that the per capita income in the student household cannot exceed 630 Brazilian reais (370 US\$). Unlike “public school”, candidates self-declared “black” students are allowed to compete for quotas even in case they studied in private colleges, whenever the mentioned socioeconomic parameter is observed.

The introduction of the quota system in public universities by the legislation of several Brazilian states has raised a very heated debate in Brazil involving both the academic world and public opinion<sup>5</sup>. Most of the debate deals with the legitimacy or not of the system. Quotas would potentially infringe the equality principle stated by the constitution, as well as the culturally widely accepted criterion of “merit”. In this perspective, the quota system would exclude a number of students who do reasonably well in the exam. Quota students would be admitted even with a low score, fact which, according to common opinion, would decrease the quality of teaching and the overall prestige of public Universities. Some critiques to the affirmative action system in Universities also rely on the fact that quotas do not tackle the real problem of inequality in Brazil. The most heard explanation for the little access of the poor to public University should be found in the short number of “posts” offered in the public undergraduate system, and especially in the scarce state investment in public primary and secondary education. It is commonly believed that an improvement of public primary and high schools would automatically give all Brazilian students the same chances to pass the *vestibular*.

By introducing quotas, the state would choose a “cheap” and very partial solution, where no structural resource distribution is made and state responsibilities for social distribution are withdrawn. Quotas are a typical redistribution procedure compatible with a neo-liberal system because the state is not directly paying for it. Nonetheless, being very improbable that any real reform of primary and secondary public education will ever occur in Brazil, the question is whether practical alternatives to the quota system really exist. On the one hand, it seems that both the Brazilian state and social movement are not strongly working at structural alternatives. On the other, it is doubtful that, even in case public education received some investment, public schools could ever compete with the private education system enjoyed by Brazilian elite.

When discussing the quota system, it cannot be denied that the major resistances that quotas face in Brazilian society are the racial ones. Affirmative actions respond to the need of raising the figures of Afro-brazilian people with a good university diploma and, consequently, potentially occupying higher positions in society. This objective would

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed view, see PPCOR, 2006, Mapa das Ações Afirmativas no Ensino Superior, 4.

take action against the social marginality and racial discrimination that the black population has faced both in slavery time and after Abolition. The action of the Black Movement for the introduction (and preservation) of the quota system in university has been so powerful that the all quota matter is often seen as a race relations one. As a consequence, the sectors of the black movement which are directly engaged with “quotas”, have gained major visibility in Brazil. “Educafro”, a group born under the umbrella of the Catholic Church, is a clear example of this phenomenon. Establishing itself as network of pre-university (*pre-vestibular*) community courses, Educafro aimed to increase the number of black and poor students in public universities. Occupying a first role in the fight for quotas, this organisation has presently gained a prime space in the Black Movement scenario in Brazil.

The scepticism that racial quotas encounter in Brazilian society would depend on the impression that the system racialise citizens (Fry, 2005:301-320; Maggie, 2005). Brazil not only would be a country where it is hard to say who is black or not, due to the high miscegenation of its population, but is also a context that has been for long moulded by the ideology of racial democracy. According to a very dominant view, since Brazilian people are the result of a racial mixture between European, African, and Native Indian population, racial boundaries cannot be clearly drawn in this country and race relations are much more relaxed than in other contexts. As a result of genetic mixture and blurred racial boundaries, discrimination and marginality of the Afro-brazilian would be due not to “racial” problems but primarily to a “class” one. After all, modern biology and genetics have already refuted any scientific legitimacy of the idea of “race”. Not less important, a biological idea of race would be the reason by which racism appeared and discriminatory policies were applied in past centuries. Seen from this angle, quotas would be a way of racialising society by splitting it into black and white. In fact, more ethnographic studies are needed to discuss whether quotas are really fostering more racism or whether “black” students perceive themselves, and are perceived, as a separate “race”; or whether opting for a “black” quota automatically would delete other intermediate forms of conceiving the self, for example as “*mestiço*”, “*moren*” and “*mulat*”. As for the posture of the Black Movement in this sense, racism already exists in Brazil and affirmative action measures cannot be really its cause. Black activists usually question the “class” approach by the fact that even succeeded black people face discrimination by their skin colour. If common sense still tends to associate black phenotype to marginality and poverty, this view might revert only in case a considerable number of black people come to occupy visibly strategic places in society. Nowadays, the majority of Brazilian universities, and UERJ amongst them, rely on self-declaration as a way to select candidates for the

“black” quotas. Decisions about establishing a commission to evaluate the racial classification of candidates, as it happens in the University of Brasilia (UnB), has found many critics at any level of society. In spite of the ethical and practical problems about judging the “blackness” of candidates, there is the risk that some people self-declare as “black” simply to benefit of quotas.

This paper wants to overpass this endless, though extremely important, debate on the legitimacy of quotas, for which many separate analyses would be needed. My attempt, instead, will be showing some practical data findings, emerged from my fieldwork research in the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), where I am carrying out a qualitative and quantitative study of the quota system. UERJ has been one of the first examples of Universities that have applied the quota system in Brazil as a consequence of a legal requirement (Law 4.061/2003<sup>6</sup>).

In 2007, in the middle of my PhD fieldwork, I have been asked by Educafro to process and describe some statistical data about performance and other social matters that are relevant to quota students in that University. These data were released by the UERJ Statistic Department - DINFO (2007) - in an aggregated form, and needed some analysis in order to draw some useful conclusions. A brief and partial discussion of these data occurred during the “Audiciencia Publica sobre Sistemas de Cotas in the Procuradoria do Estado do Rio de Janeiro” in March 2008, but has found very little space elsewhere. I will use my data analysis as an excuse to show patterns identified at UERJ and raise some questions about the issues observed in the implementation of the quota system there. The analysis will be partially complemented by few ethnographic observation I realised in the University, where I research students, academic and administrative staff to understand the different angles of the “quota” experience.

### **Academic Performance and Dropping Out Rates Amongst Quota Students**

Interesting data relate to the performance and dropping out rates of quota students, since this group is generally expected to do worse and have higher abandon rates than non-quota students. Such prediction is not reflected by data referring to the period 2003-2007. These data show that quota students have higher Coefficient of Average Performance (CRM<sup>7</sup>) than other students, if we exclude the figures concerning the Disabled and Indigenous category – which is statistically not very relevant due to the low number of these students. In particular, it can be observed that between 2003 and 2007, public school students have

<sup>6</sup>This law followed laws 3.524/2000 and 3.708/2001

<sup>7</sup> *Coefficiente de Rendimento Medio.*

scored in average CRM 6,56, black quota students 6,41, and non-quota students 6,37. This average was calculated between 49 undergraduate programmes assessed by credits, and does not necessarily reflect the situation in each Programme. Even though the average seems to favour quota students, the CRM of the different groups varies depending on the course, as shown by some examples:

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

Drawing the conclusion that quota students do better than non-quota students, just relying on the general CRM, between courses at UERJ would be rather simplistic. In fact, not necessarily all Programme have the same weight due to the different actual distribution between quota and non-quota students in each course and to the different social standard ascribed to each course. In addition to this, some courses count on a very low number of quota students and this population might be not statistically significant in all Programmes. In spite of these preliminary considerations, data suggest that there are not significant performance differences between quota and non-quota students at UERJ. Consequently, the quota system could be not invalidated by arguments of supposed low performance of the quota students. This fact is relevant by considering the usually very different educational background of quota and non-quota students, their very different rank in the vestibular exam, and the bigger effort that quota students have to make to overcome academic difficulties. Not less important, a considerable number of quota students have presumably less access to studying resources such as books and internet. A limitation to this analysis is that the information offered by the Statistical Department of the University is not divided by year. Consequently we miss the trend of student academic performance throughout the full academic course. The final average, for example, would not show whether the CRM of quota students tends to peak – positively or negatively - or to be constant during the academic Programme.

An additional way to evaluate the quota system at UERJ is looking at dropping out rates. Again in this case, general expectations about higher dropping out rates amongst quota students are contradicted by facts. While 17% of non-quota students registered between 2003 and 2007 dropped out, only 13% of black quota students and 10% of public school quota students did the same. These data are, once again, an

“average” between all courses. These figures do not show which year of the undergraduate programme “evasion” tend to be more intense. Also, figures do not consider that in some Departments such as Mathematics, where dropping out rates are very high, the concentration of quota students is very low and this population is statistically not very significant.

By looking more specifically at the Law Department, data illustrate that non-quota students registered between 2003 and 2007 have shown higher dropping rates (4,83%) than black students (3,64%), but lower rates than “public school” students (5,35%). Dropping out figures in the History course show 19,2% evasion rates amongst non-quota students, 5,38% amongst black quota students, and 4,1% amongst public school quota students, considering the pool of students registered between 2003 and 2007. Although data show that quota students generally tend to drop out less than non-quota students, but they do not explain why. While in the case of quota students it is arguable that lack of financial resources and academic weaknesses are the main reason for quitting Programmes, non-quota students might be driven by different reasons when they drop out. A reason to be further investigated is that non-quota students, when they get a chance, have more options to move to a course with better income perspectives, considering the relative facility they can pass the *vestibular* exam. By chatting with some Law students I realised that many of them were already registered in other courses such as Social Sciences, Philosophy and Literature, by the time they started the Law Programme. Social Sciences and other Humanities courses might in some cases work as “parking areas” for students who wait for something better to show up. It may be not a coincidence that non-quota students dropping out rates are so high in History, a career whose employability and economic return might be not meet the aspirations of wealthier students, thus favouring evasion. For quota students, in contrast, a place at University is often the only chance in life to graduate from a good University independent of the course chosen. Especially amongst low class families, where very few members ever entered a University, a graduated student might at least represent an improvement of the family symbolic status.

As a reflection of the different social and thus educational background of students, it is important to consider that non-quota students scored extremely well in the *vestibular* exam. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Year Law Programme (started in 2007), non-quota students passed the vestibular only if classifying within the first 168 candidates, over the almost 3,000 candidates who were admitted to the final exam. In contrast, the very strong majority of quota students classified between the 1,000<sup>th</sup> and the 1,800<sup>th</sup> position. As a further marker between quota and non-quota students, a good number of quota students have a part-time job in order to pay their expenses when they do not manage to mobilise a family



network to get financial help. The financial help allocated by UERJ for students by the “Proiniciar” Programme, 190 Brazilian reais per month (approximately 110 US\$) only during the first year, is an appreciable effort made by the University considering the low budget offered by the state. However this sum is insufficient to cover the needs of these students. The rates of worker students usually increase in the night University shift, when a chance of studying is offered also to full time workers<sup>8</sup>. The availability of the time quota students have for studying is generally also reduced by the fact that these students are requested to attend several extra courses to improve their academic skills during the first year<sup>9</sup>.

If quota students manage to cope satisfactorily with the Law course, this can be explained by the fact this Programme is quite demanded by quota applicants. As a result, most quota students classified with a reasonably good mark<sup>10</sup>. Also, as I have already mentioned, in the *vestibular* exam for Law in 2007, quota students generally placed between the 1,000<sup>th</sup> and the 1,800<sup>th</sup> position over approximately 3,000 candidates who were admitted to the final exam. Many of these students had also attended “pre-vestibular” community or private courses to prepare for the vestibular, and some of them tried the exam a couple of times before being successful. This fact shows that quota beneficiaries in the Law Department are neither “illiterate” students nor people without a clue of what university is. Not less important, these students are not the less deprived and marginal in the Brazilian social pyramid. They often belong to low and low-middle class families with some pre-conditions for social mobility. Usually, quota students are the first members of the family to enter a university, but they still have been exposed to some level of education during their life. In some cases, the all network of relatives support the students, for example by sponsoring the purchase of books or paying for transport. The chance for social mobility of one member is often seen as a capital for an entire extended family.

Although the information about the academic performance and dropping out rates amongst quota students is encouraging; this does not mean that quota students and non-quota ones have a similar experience in University. By socialising with quota students I have acknowledged that many of them found it quite difficult to adapt to their Programme and scored so far lower marks than non-quota students during the first assessments. In addition to this, non-quota students seemed to be very relaxed in taking class, while quota students made a considerable huge effort in terms of study hours. At the beginning of the course, between

<sup>8</sup> UERJ allows students to study a same Programme in the morning or at night, in this last case favouring those students who have a job.

<sup>9</sup> Attending these courses is requested by Proiniciar as a condition to receive the 190 Brazilian reais per month scholarship.

<sup>10</sup> These students generally score ‘B’ and ‘C’ as a final mark in the ‘*vestibular*’ exam (in less prestigious courses this mark is generally lower – being ‘A’ the maximum and ‘D’ the minimum).

September and December 2007, some quota students were feeling quite frustrated by the unfair relation between time spent studying and performance in assessments. Some students even thought about the possibility of quitting the Programme due to their lack of abilities at studying, memorising and writing. Other quota students referred to me that they realised that the time they spent studying for the first assessments was insufficient, but they were not sure about what they should do to perform well (for example, how long and detailed an answer should be in a written exam). As Fernando –first year Law quota student – says,

Our Civil Law teacher explained that we cannot answer a question by one line, since we are expected to articulate a discourse and show all we know about a subject...many students answered questions almost in the form “yes” or “not” form, so the teacher explained that this is not a multiple choice test, it is a discursive assessment!.

Fernando also mentioned about the lack of effort by which non-quota students seemed to pass exams in the first year, even though they might give the idea of being less committed. Having said that, the marks of quota students in general incredibly improved in the second assessments, after students enhanced their methodology of studying and understood how much they were expected to perform.

Before the second assessments of the first semester I also noticed a strong solidarity amongst quota 1<sup>st</sup> year students, in some cases helped by non-quota students with a similar social background. Some quota students gathered in the Postgraduate rooms several times in the afternoon to discuss course topics and help each others. The idea of the quota students as more dedicated is widespread in the class, even amongst the non-quota students. Quota students are often seen as those who take notes very carefully and study more, spend afternoons in the Library and sit in the front rows of the classroom in order to pay more attention to what teachers say. It is a common belief that quota students study more in order to overcome educational weaknesses and because they usually invest everything in their academic chance, an opportunity they cannot really miss.

According to the majority of the people I interviewed, the weaknesses of quota students may relate mostly to the use of the Portuguese language, especially in its written form. However, no reference was done to any supposed inability of quota students at understanding academic subjects. In fact, most 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year students and teachers do not notice a relevant difference in performance between quota and non quota students, thus confirming the statistical data. During

interviews people often mentioned that some quota students will be very good professionals and that some of the best students in the class are quota ones. In this regard, a high middle class 3<sup>rd</sup> year student from Jardim Botânico refers

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

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

There are quota students that are brilliant and with an above-average intelligence. However, due to the socio-economic conditions to which they were exposed, some students do not write a fine Portuguese; in this sense they might be somehow penalised in the job market...you know, lawyers and solicitors basically work with language.... This does not mean that these students are not improving their job chances by University education, and does not mean that all quota students cannot write a good Portuguese...I personally lower a bit student marks when they make grammar or orthographic mistakes because I want to warn students that they have to worry about that (Penal Law Teacher).

### **Questions About Access and Distribution of Quota Students in Different Courses**

In my experience in the Law Department, the striking majority of the non-quota students interviewed originate from exclusive private colleges, usually religious private institutions. The quota beneficiaries, in contrast, are people who studied in precarious public or less exclusive private colleges, and could unlikely compete for a place in the Law Department without a quota. By analysing the classification in the Law Programme in the 2007 *vestibular*, I noticed that only 2 public school quota students (over 64 posts available in this category) and only 2 black quota students (over 64 posts available) would have passed even without applying through the quota system. An additional 1 public school quota student and 3 black quota students would be admitted even in case the quota system was not implemented, because in that case the pool of total posts available would be wider (312 posts). In

total, just 8 students who applied by public school and black quotas over 312 candidates admitted in the Law Programme would have been approved even without the implementation of a quota system. A similar situation is observed in 2008.

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

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

Change is also confirmed by students who started their courses before the quota system was introduced and by teachers with pre-quota experience at UERJ. A Law teacher, in this sense, pointed out that particular locale, not only the classroom space, show that UERJ has finally new users.

I realise the student collective has changed by looking at the people using the building lifts, or those sitting in the canteens in each floor.

It is also interesting that the quickest way to define the change in the demographic landscape is looking at the amount of black students circulating in the University. White quota students are less indicative of this phenomenon because white students have traditionally been the users of the Law Department. The same teacher refers,

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

It is worth saying that although change is more strikingly seen in courses which were traditionally very exclusive to wealthy people, the same trend is usually observed in all courses. At a minor level, according to several interviewees, even less prestigious courses such as History experienced some growth in the number of black or "darker" (*mais escuros*) students. Such change is considered more visible in the morning shift, where the number of wealthier and thus white students has been traditionally higher<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> A reason for this is that wealthier students, who are mostly white, do not usually need to work and can more easily study during the day.

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

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

The first year of introduction of the quota system (2003) it can be observed that quota students represented over 60%, with a very high percentage of “black” quota students. That year has to be considered a very anomalous case due to overlapping between different laws and the existence of different channels of selection<sup>12</sup>. In 2004, due to the confusion of rules in 2003, the system was re-considered by establishing a sole channel and foreseeing 20% of vacancies for students who studied all the second phase of their education process in state public schools, 20% for self-declared black students, and 5% for indigenous and disable people. Economic parameters were also established in 2004 and afterward reconsidered, being presently established as no more than 630 Brazilian reais per capita in the student’s household. A minimum score, the mentioned cutting mark of 20 points to be gathered between the two phases of the *vestibular* was also introduced in 2006.

In spite of the several changes to the system and the anomaly of 2003, some conclusions can be drawn about the access trend of quota students between 2004 and 2007. The table shows that the most striking information concern the decreasing percentage of quota students over the student collective registered every year, in particular black quota

<sup>12</sup> The state law initially foresaw that 50% of the vacancies in public state universities would be reserved to students who carried out all their formation process in public schools in the State of Rio de Janeiro. However, the selection of quota candidates in 2003 occurred according to two different channels, the SADE, specific for quota applicants, and the ‘Vestibular Estadual’ for those students who did not fit the criteria established for the quota system. The same year a new law established that 40% of vacancies in the same universities had to be reserved to students self-declared as ‘negros’ (‘black’ and ‘brown’). This rule was extended both to SADE and to the ‘Vestibular Estadual’ system, explaining why the number of self-declared black students admitted in 2003 was so high.

students. This level has reached a warning level in the first semester of 2007, when only 8,74% of students enrolled into academic Programmes by using black quotas. On the other hand, the access trend for the public school quota students seems to keep more or less constant in spite of a mild decrease in 2007. This figure will show a further decrease in 2008, when only 15% of the 20% available was filled by “public school” quota students. Also for this kind of analysis is worth saying that average figures do not necessarily represent what happens in each course. As an example, it can be observed that while “black” and “public school” quotas have been filled more or less constantly between 2004 and 2007, in disciplines such as Medicine, Law, Social Sciences and History, the trend in other courses seems to be negative. In Statistics, Physics, Engineering, Mathematics and Economics, the black and public school quotas are filled well below the 20% established by the legislation, with figures often close to 0%. Economics, Statistics, and Mathematics enrolled no “black” quota student in the first semester 2007. It is important to clarify that those posts which are not covered by quota students are filled by classified non-quota applicants. As a consequence, the percentage of enrolling non-quota students over the student collective has constantly increased from 2003, reaching 75% of the new registered students in 2008. In fact, the number of quota students presently studying at UERJ is far lower than people might expect. If teachers complained about the quality of their students in courses like Maths, Statistics and Economics, it would be important to inform them that they do not basically have any quota students in their class!

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

It remains to discuss why in several courses there is a general decrease in quota students. However, due to the lack of “official” reasons, it remains to deal with hypotheses. One possible reason is that during

the years which immediately followed the introduction of quotas, there was a very high demand by all those people who did not have any chance to do free university education until that moment. This fact might partially explain why demand was particularly high in 2003 and 2004. However, other factors may have exerted some negative influence. A number of UERJ academics ascribe the decrease in the demand for quotas to the Prouni State Programme, which was introduced by the Law 11.096/2005. Prouni foresees that the state funds the tuition fees of needy students in private universities. These institutions are usually a better option for poor students because more widely located in the city and the suburb area. With very few exceptions, private universities are also considered less demanding for people without a solid educational background and less time available for studying. The Prouni explanation was confirmed to me by several students I met in community *pre-vestibular* courses<sup>13</sup>. In several cases, low class students would not believe in the possibility of passing the access exam in a public university or dealing with a demanding Programme, even though they are aware that public university holds higher status in Brazil. Most students do not even give UERJ a try by considering bureaucracy of the quota system too complex; other candidates desist after the first phase of the *vestibular* exam by finding Prouni a more accessible way to receive university education. Not less important, the location of UERJ in the city would entail high transportation and time costs for many students, especially worker ones, even though the Proiniciar Programme makes some effort to integrate such expenses.

It should be said that the decreasing number of quota students who pass the exam and register every year also follows the general falling trend of UERJ candidates in the *vestibular* exam from 2003 and 2008. Only in 2005, 73.890 candidates tried the access exam, versus 69.662 in 2006, 63.699 in 2007, and 61.877 in 2008 (12.000 candidates less than in 2005). This phenomenon is not justified by the trend of students finishing colleges every year, which, according to Professor Sobreira (Pedagogy, UERJ), should be actually growing by 3% every year according to Brazilian demographic trends.

Figures might suggest that the availability of quotas does not automatically generate high “demand”. It cannot be denied that, by improving the public school system by massive state investments and increasing the amount and duration of scholarships, more quota candidate would apply to the *vestibular*. Nonetheless, other reasons can be also discussed. A specific point raised by the Black Movement - in particular Educafro - is that the introduction of a “cutting” mark

<sup>13</sup> These courses prepare for the *vestibular* exam at a community level and are usually attended by low class students. The objective is raising the chances of low class students in getting a place in Universities, in exchange of a very little (or no) cost.

(*nota de corte*) in 2006 is keeping many potential candidates out of the University. According to Father David Santos (Educafro) UERJ would be tricking the law by hampering the quota system, and returning a huge number of quota posts to non-quota students. A similar explanation is offered by Professor Henrique Sobreira in the Faculty of Education at UERJ-Duque de Caxias. Sobreira points out that in the last year posts were not filled in many courses in the Duque de Caxias establishment, and he ascribes the reason to the increased difficulty of the *vestibular* exam. In particular, Sobreira believes that the cutting mark was introduced in 2006 to contain the number of quota students applying to the university, especially in the highly demanded courses.

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

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

Due to the complexity of the scenario it would be even more arduous to infer why the percentage of quota students is particularly decreasing within the “black” quota group. It is not clear, for example, whether these students, less than others, finish college and have the economic conditions to survive during an academic course. In the same way, it is not clear whether more black students due to economic conditions and educational background tend to opt for private low standard



universities; or whether a more general problem has to do with the reluctance students might show to register as “black” quota students. It is also an evidence emerged from my ethnographic research that many students who self-identify as black still prefer to try the vestibular by the “public school” channel when they have a chance. In most cases I analysed, black students who used “public school” quotas did not like the idea of enjoying an educational privilege by the colour of their skin. This consideration would open a big issue relating to the experience of black quotas at UERJ, and cannot be really discussed here. I will limit to observe that, quite interestingly, the same students usually find it quite reasonable to enjoy a privilege by the fact they attended a public school, probably because this fact would relate to something wrong in the State and not in their bodies. For sure, the rational by which these students form their opinion about racial quotas should be further explored along with its historic foundations.

## **Conclusion**

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

According to numbers, the academic performance of quota and non-quota students is very similar. Also, average dropping out rates seems to suggest that quota students quit Programs less than other students. Nonetheless, several variables have to be taken into account when doing this kind of analysis, in order to avoid making easy generalisations or thinking that the implementation of the quota system at UERJ is not problematic. A distinction between courses has to be kept in mind because each courses have their own peculiarities both in terms of student population, prestige, and difficulty of Programmes. In each course, the general distribution between wealthy and poor students can be very variable, as well as the tendency to drop out or perform well. More sociological and ethnographic research, along with further data collection, should be carried out to understand who the quota and the non quota students are and why, as a particularly worrying phenomenon, fewer quota students are getting access to many Universities courses in the last years. Either if this situation is determined by lack of interest of socially disadvantaged students in many subjects, or by a mechanism of exclusion paradoxically generated by the same quota system, as Sobreira suggests, sociology and anthropology might help to cast light over this nebulous scenario.

As a final point I would like to mention the difficulty by which statistical data can be obtained at UERJ, even when passing through the high levels of university bureaucracy. The University counts on a Statistical Department which is of extremely hard access. In spite of this fact, some data were unofficially released in 2007, proving that the Statistical Department holds an incredibly rich pool of data relating to any social and academic aspects of students. Such a paradox encourages reflection about the way the structure of academic institutions might negatively interfere with the production of social knowledge, even when this knowledge relate to the institution itself. Easier access to data would be a great service not only to UERJ and its students but also to Brazilian society, where the general debate around the legitimacy of quotas might have partially obscured the interest in how this system actually works.

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