

International student mobility and attitudes towards inequality

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SUMMARY

The process of globalization has brought with it major transformations in the panorama of higher education worldwide, which has become increasingly internationalized. Within this context of internationalization, student mobility has become a key element, the component on which programs and policies usually focus. However, despite the increase in the last decade, participation in international mobility programs has not always been distributed equally across beneficiaries. In Brazil, for instance, the release of a massive international student mobility program in 2011 has been followed by severe criticisms regarding its biased selection, which (indirectly) targeted students with more privileged profiles. The figures about inequality in student mobility raise an essential concern for the design of exchange programs. Even though those programs are not necessarily intended to alleviate social and economic inequality, they may lead to unexpected consequences, such as raising discrepancies between participants and non-participants.

This dissertation aims to contribute to the literature on student mobility and inequality by focusing on the case of Brazil. Using a quantitative approach anchored in the economics and higher education literature, it focuses on two dimensions: student mobility's potential to change people's worldviews, specifically their inequality attitudes and its role in improving human capital. The study is structured into five chapters.

Chapter 1 presents the country context and the roadmap of the thesis and introduces the motivation, goal of each chapter, methodology, and data used.

Chapter 2 provides the base to understand the potential determinants of inequality preferences in Brazil. It presents an overview of the literature on the topic, focusing on discussing the role that sociodemographic and economic individual characteristics have in shaping people's views. It uses secondary data from a study on public opinion conducted by OXFAM, an international non-governmental organization, in partnership with Datafolha, a private Brazilian public opinion research institute. Results show that race, an element overlooked in studies about attitudes toward inequality, plays a significant role when investigating inequality preferences in Brazil. White people have lower odds of believing that reducing

inequalities is essential for Brazil's progress compared with black, browns, indigenous, and others. Moreover, we also find that those identifying themselves as black and those classifying their occupation as students are the only individuals having higher odds of agreeing that the government has the role of reducing inequalities, a trend visible mainly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenging conventional theories about rational choices, being educated is associated with higher odds of believing that reducing inequality is fundamental for progress, while we do not find a clear association between income and inequality views.

Chapter 3 examines the impact that exchange programs have on changing students' attitudes toward inequality. The chapter focuses on two main dimensions: preference and perception of inequality. It exploits primary data of more than a thousand students from a well-known and internationalized Brazilian university collected through an online survey. Using Propensity Score Matching to construct an artificial control group, results show that going abroad does not affect students' preferences regarding reducing within-country inequality. Still, international mobility affects students' salary preferences, with mobile students expressing a preference for higher salaries for high-skilled jobs. Results also show that mobility affects how individuals perceive current inequality, as mobile students believe within-country inequality is smaller than their non-mobile counterparts.

Chapter 4 provides an empirical analysis of the role international student mobility has in improving human capital by examining the impact that the timing of an exchange experience has on students' academic performance. It focuses on two facets of the temporal dimension: the moment in which students travel and the length of the period spent abroad. To provide causal evidence, the chapter exploits novel data from more than 10,000 students from a highly internationalized Brazilian university from 2010 to 2020. By combining Propensity Score Matching with Difference in Differences techniques, results show that international mobility impacts groups of students differently. Students who travel closer to the end of their undergraduate courses benefit the most from the mobility experience, while negative effects are found for those who travel at the beginning of their university program. Results also show that, while student mobility impacts positively and significantly students who participate in programs lasting from one semester to one year, negative effects are associated with shorter periods abroad.

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by summarizing its main findings and illustrating the policy implications of the study.