

## EDITORIAL

# Homer's odyssey and Brazilian universities

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On August 7, the Brazilian Senate passed a bill (180/2008) establishing a quota policy for students' admission to federal universities. Beginning next year, Brazilian federal universities must offer 50% of their places to students who graduated from public schools. In each state, these places must be distributed according to the state's ethnic distribution (black or Brazilian natives). Although racial quota policies rest on an image of social equality (and apart from a philosophical discussion on reverse racism), this explicit legal obligation is a serious breach of the constitutionally established university autonomy. This policy transforms Brazilian universities into a modern version of the Greek Polyphemus myth.

Polyphemus was a giant Cyclops who lived in a cave on the remote island of Cyclopes, where, according to Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses and his crew were shipwrecked after the Trojan War. When Ulysses' crew came upon this cave, it was filled with sheep, which were the property of Polyphemus. The son of Poseidon and Thoosa, this one-eyed monster's tremendous strength contrasted with his single large eye.

Universities are not unlike Polyphemus. Since their creation, universities have been respected as centers of the production and transmission of knowledge, and the purity of this knowledge is guaranteed by universities' independence and autonomy. University autonomy may be compared with the large eye of Polyphemus: it provides a broad and critical view that oversees its scientific production and prevents the interference of public and private interests.

Last year, an editorial published in *Nature* (1) addressed the issue of how scientists are solving problems in high-school science education by engaging in actions such as visits to high schools. To this approach, we added comments on our experience at the State University of Campinas, which has a high-school program in which students visit research labs (2). We demonstrated that this

single-month placement of high-school students in our laboratory presented science attractively and encouraged a fair portion of the visiting students to seek admission to good universities to pursue scientific careers. Furthermore, our program, 'Vocations in Science and the Arts', demonstrated that university initiatives can improve basic education without government interference.

To preserve a university's autonomy, all rules involving student admissions must be created by the university itself. Government interventions, such as the recently approved bill 180/2008 by the Brazilian Senate, may dramatically interfere with this constitutionally guaranteed privilege and may seriously damage academic activities. Because bill 180/2009 was sanctioned by President Rouseff, we understand that its constitutionality must be challenged before the Supreme Court.

Returning to the Polyphemus myth, when the giant realized his cave had been invaded, he blocked its entrance with a huge stone. Ulysses cleverly engendered a plan: he offered Polyphemus strong wine, took advantage of the giant's drunkenness and destroyed his single eye. With no vision, Polyphemus became defenseless, allowing Ulysses and his men to steal the sheep and escape the cave and the island.

We suggest that this decision by the Brazilian Senate to force federal universities to reserve 50% of their admissions for specific groups represents the wine designed to injure the critical and observant eye of "Polyphemus". Are Brazilian federal universities destined to become a blind old mythical creature in the eyes of future generations?

## REFERENCES

1. Those who can. *Nature*. 2011;473(7346):123.
2. Cunha LL, Ward LS. Promoting science careers in Brazil. *Nature*. 2011;474(7352):450, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/474450d>.

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