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Opinion – Sou Ciência: 2.3 million dropped out of higher education in 2021

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A constant concern of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is the dropout in the middle of the course by their students, which is technically called “dropout”. In addition to representing losses in the social, academic and economic spheres, it also means great emotional suffering for those who, for some reason, have to drop out of their courses. The factors are multiple and need to be understood.

The general impression currently formed is that, with the Covid-19 pandemic that started in 2020, the dropout rate of university students has worsened in the country. Consulting the Synopsis of data from the Higher Education Census of MEC-INEP, however, allows us to think that this is a half-truth and that the dropout phenomenon requires a more careful and in-depth reflection from us.

When we compare the behavior of dropout rates at public and private institutions over the last 5 years (2017-2021), we notice very different trends, revealing that student dropout affects these HEIs unequally. Data for 2022 is not yet available.

In the historical series, it is possible to see the trend of continuous growth in the evasion rate of private HEIs since 2017, having suffered a pronounced increase in 2018 (rising almost 4 percentage points), before, therefore, the pandemic.

In public HEIs, the rate remained constant between 2017 and 2019 (16.5%), suffered a significant increase in 2020 (21.8%), when the pandemic began, but showed a significant drop in the following year (9. 4%), showing that, after the initial impact, the performance of public HEIs was efficient to contain the damage of the pandemic on student permanence, probably because they offered slightly more adequate conditions for welcoming students, supporting and maintaining teachers and to the continuity of studies.

The last year of the historical series (2021) shows that the dropout rate reached the level of 38.8% in private HEIs, which is equivalent to a loss of 2.19 million students. In public HEIs, the loss represented 165 thousand undergraduates, with a dropout rate of 9.4%.

The evasion phenomenon is very complex, it must be better understood and harshly fought with institutional and governmental policies, if we want to favor, in fact, a concrete opportunity for social mobility in the country. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Brazilians with a higher education earn on average 2.5 times more than those with a high school diploma. It is the biggest wage difference observed among the 46 countries analyzed by the organization.

Another very important movement to understand the flow of students in undergraduate courses is to compare the number of students who enter graduation and who complete their courses. In this sense, the historical series shows us a relatively stable behavior for public HEIs, which had a loss of 7% of new entrants in 2021, when compared to 2016, and a loss of 11% of graduates in the same period.

In the case of private HEIs, the situation is quite different. Both curves – freshmen and graduates – are ascending, revealing that the sector sustained an enormous expansion in the period, offering new vacancies and courses, increasing enrollments. However, if the number of freshmen in 2021 is 40% higher than that registered in 2016, the number of graduates increased by only 20%. This difference shows that the expansion policy of private HEIs focuses on attracting new enrollments and that these students do not necessarily complete their courses, dropping out along the way.

On the one hand, private HEIs have produced a huge contingent of frustrated people in their quest to obtain higher professional qualifications, in many cases becoming indebted to their funders. On the other hand, the effort concentrated on attracting new students seems to work as a mechanism for increasing profits, with the capture of new resources in the form of enrollments and monthly fees for the first months/years of graduation. In the balance to maintain profitability, private institutions have fired (some of them massively) professors and employees, jeopardizing the quality of courses, and increased their bets (and vacancies) in distance learning courses – in a disastrous scenario, already discussed in another article on our blog.

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It is not news that the causes of evasion are of different natures and may be related. On a personal level, students may, for example, have made wrong course choices, have tense teaching-learning relationships, have difficulty adapting to university life, may feel incompatibility between academic life and the demands of the world of work or even discover new interests that lead them to search for other professions.

At the institutional level, evasion may be related, among other factors, to outdated courses or courses that offer a curricular matrix full of prerequisites, preventing students from advancing in their courses, obscure evaluation/approval criteria, lack of teacher training to teaching, absence of institutional programs to raise the quality of training and student permanence.

With regard to external causes, evasion may be related to the labor market, social recognition of the chosen career/profession, financial difficulties, the absence of consistent and continuous public policies. Factors potentiated by the Brazilian economic crisis that lasted for almost a decade.

These elements show how it is necessary to better understand the phenomenon, but mainly to offer student assistance and permanence programs, such as scholarships, investing in actions aimed at reducing dropout indicators, fundamental measures mainly for students from poor families.

In addition, we need to ensure quality higher education instead of encouraging an expansion process that only prioritizes access (and profit, for private institutions, especially large financialized groups) and that cares little for the permanence and student completion. It is urgent that the country re-establish a rigorous process of regulation of Higher Education and support for the permanence of students.

Establishing quality higher education is not restricted to opening vacancies and expanding enrollments, it is necessary to guarantee qualified training and monitoring and support for each student, as a citizen and not just as a consumer, to overcome challenges and difficulties, and become become a professional capable of making a difference for a better future for himself and for the country. The Brazilian crisis and the bottom of the well we reached are closely linked to the difficulty in forming, at the highest level, the new generations.

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