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SUS, science and universities value themselves in the pandemic, suggests research – 08/29/2021 – Balance and Health

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the number of Brazilians who value the SUS (Unified Health System), science, public universities and university hospitals.

According to a recent survey by the Sou_Science study center (Society, University and Science), before the arrival of the coronavirus, 40% of Brazilians attributed a very high importance to the SUS. Now, that figure has risen to 62%.

At the same time, the percentage of those who give little or very little importance to the Unified Health System dropped from 14% to 9%.

The study confirms the perception of managers and health professionals, who were already pointing to a rediscovery of the SUS.

Sou_Ciência, a study center based at Unifesp (Federal University of São Paulo), interviewed 1,268 people, respecting demographic figures based on the 2018 Pnad (National Household Sample Survey) and the 2010 Census, both from the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics).

The survey, carried out in partnership with the Idea Big Data Institute, also showed an appreciation of science, whose importance was seen as very high by 47% before the pandemic, and which has now risen to 70%.

The percentage of those who give low or very low importance to science has plummeted from 12% to 5%.

The appreciation of science occurs even among those who consider the government of Jair Bolsonaro to be excellent or good (no party), although the president has given numerous demonstrations of disapproval of the scientific method.

According to Pedro Fiori Arantes, professor of art history at Unifesp and one of the coordinators of Sou_Ciência, the next step in the research is to better understand this phenomenon, which he calls crossed profiles. “The pocketnaristas are in favor of science and the public university and, on the other hand, we have critics of the government who are not in favor of science and the university”, he says.

For Arantes, a possible preliminary explanation for the crossed profiles would be the fact that the president’s supporters have higher income and education than the population average.

The researchers also collected data related to Covid-19 vaccination. Of the total responses, only 5.5% said they did not take any dose and do not intend to do so. The result is similar to the Datafolha survey, which showed record adherence to vaccines.

The role of public universities and university hospitals was another research axis. In this case, the percentage of those who attribute very high importance rose from 42% to 59%.

Sou_Ciência also questioned respondents about the increase in the number of universities and federal institutes in the country. Just over half (52%) said they were in favor of resuming the expansion of free public higher education and increasing this type of investment. A minority share (8%) defended privatizing universities and/or charging tuition, in addition to reducing investment in the sector.

For Soraya Smaili, former dean of Unifesp and one of the coordinators of Sou_Ciência, increased confidence in the SUS, in public universities and in Brazilian science are interlinked. According to her, Brazil has 40 university hospitals that make up a decisive service network during the pandemic and that had a great impact on how people see public health.

“Our universities played a fundamental role in promoting health, carrying out diagnostic tests, producing clinical research for new treatments and also obtaining vaccines against Covid-19”, he says.

The racial quota policy was another point addressed in the research. Just under half of respondents (44%) said they were in favor of continuing this public policy, while 19% defend its cancellation.

Another point that the researchers investigated was the means used when respondents seek reliable information about the pandemic, prevention, treatment and vaccines. Open television (44%), social media (39%) and magazines and newspapers (35%) were the most indicated in question with multiple possible answers.

Pedro Fiori Arantes states that this data shows that, even with social networks, traditional media is still seen as the safest and most reliable for a large portion of the population.

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Official communications from the federal government (27%) and from state and municipal bodies (31%) appear a little behind. Bolsonaro's official pronouncements were cited as reliable sources of information by 9% of respondents.

Sites from research institutes and universities were nominated by 32%.

"This information is promising, in the sense that the population is willing to listen and seek information in universities, but there is a huge inequality [no acesso a esses canais] between people with higher income and education and those with low income and less education", says Arantes, who sees the great challenge of Brazilian science in making it more accessible to a larger portion of the population.

"It is important that universities and scientists have established, widely publicized and more recognized channels," says Arantes.

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