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Opinion – I'm Science: PEC 206: a hard blow to youth

The Proposal for a Constitutional Amendment (PEC) 206/2019, authored by Federal Deputy General Peternelli (União/SP), aims to amend two articles of the Federal Constitution with the aim of enabling the collection of tuition fees in Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES) . A rehashed proposal, which has been circulating for some time in the country, inspired by the United States and by part of European universities, which, despite being public, began to charge tuition fees as part of the neoliberal adjustment, since the 1980s – and which resulted in gigantic student indebtedness. .

If approved, the PEC, which has already received a favorable report from federal deputy Kim Kataguiri, from the same party, should seriously wound the recent process of democratization of higher education in the country.

And what is the justification for such a setback? The rapporteur states – apparently, without deep knowledge on the subject – that "most of the students of these universities end up coming from private schools and could pay the tuition…. and that it is not correct for the whole of society to finance the study of young people from the upper classes".

Despite being based on a report authored by the World Bank, called A Fair Fit, 2017, the argument is wrong insofar as it makes use of outdated data on the profile of students from public institutions, prior to the establishment of the quota policy and the expansion of vacancies, from 2005.

To combat this type of misconception, which usually spreads through social networks like wildfire, it is essential to recover historical facts and empirical evidence. Ten years after the promulgation of the Federal Constitution, a movement took shape in Brazilian society that demanded the adoption of racial and social quotas for admission to public universities, historically elitist. The special highlight was the protagonism of the black movement, which achieved the adhesion of several public institutions in the adoption of affirmative actions throughout the 2000s.

In the following decade, the Law of Quotas for IFES (2012) was finally enacted, which consolidated a significant change in the historical elitist profile of the university community, with the reservation of 50% of admission places for students who had completed the entire High School. in public schools, combining to this profile the family income situation – having up to 1.5 minimum wages per capita (R$ 1,818.00 in today's values) – and/or the self-declaration of race and ethnicity.

At the end of 2016, the law started to include a reserve percentage also for people with disabilities. The amount of places reserved is defined according to the proportion of the target population in the federation units where the institutions are located. As a result, Brazilian public universities have become increasingly diverse and inclusive.

A recent study by SoU_Ciência, based on data from the Higher Education Census, proves this profound change, as can be seen in the figure.

The data show that between 2012 and 2022, with 10 years of validity of the quota policy, the student profile changed profoundly. In addition, there is recent evidence that the children of the elite are migrating to state-of-the-art private universities, with high tuition and therefore super selective, or to courses abroad, with even higher values.

In addition to penalizing middle and lower class youth who are still in public universities, the collection of tuition fees should have a devastating impact, as happened with student debt in the US and in other countries, such as Chile. In the US, the collection of tuition fees was the gateway to the privatization of university services and the advancement of mercantile teaching and research practices. It is always good to emphasize that the constitutional principle of the right to education is universal in Brazil. This means that quality public education must be available to all without distinction and must not be converted into a commodity.

Another myth that needs to be dispelled concerns the supposed high cost of public students compared to private or foreign HEIs. As already shown by Prof. Nelson Cardoso Amaral, from UFG and SoU_Ciência, Brazil has an expenditure per student in higher education below the average of OECD countries, despite not being very distant. However, this comparison must be viewed with great care, since the budget of Brazilian federal universities includes resources for the maintenance of their hospitals and research laboratories, museums, orchestras, radios, televisions, farms, event centers, retirees and pensioners in the leaves. of payment etc.

It is not possible to admit, in terms of comparison, an account that only divides the budget amount by the number of undergraduate students enrolled in the courses offered by the IFES – disregarding specialization and graduate students, residents in university hospitals, etc.

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Instead of having to defend the obvious, gratuity and access to education as a fundamental right, we should be demanding the responsibility of our governments to design and debate the continuity of the expansion of public universities, the expansion of undergraduate and postgraduate studies, the improvement of the quota policy and the resumption of investments, since there is still a huge number of candidates without vacancies in public HEIs, even in view of the expansion of private universities since 1990.

Clarity is needed to understand the real challenges of Brazilian education and face them with competence: a fair allocation of public funds and the repeal of the spending ceiling for higher education, ensuring the future of young people and the development of our country, with sovereignty and equity.?

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