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Opinion – Sou Ciência: Distance education threatens the quality of private courses

The results of the 2020 Higher Education Census, published by the Ministry of Education (MEC) earlier this year, show a worrying scenario for the quality of training offered in public and private undergraduate courses in the country.

The first observation is a continuous growth trend of Distance Education (DE) in private institutions: if in 2007 the volume of students in distance education was just over 7% of the total, in 2020, it jumped to 44%. This trend has intensified even more in relation to new entrants, which in 2017 were 37% and rose to 60.5% in 2020, as a study by SoU_Ciência has already shown.

This strong growth in enrollments in distance education courses at private universities is not just justified by the pandemic. It is an older phenomenon, the result of mergers and acquisitions between private institutions, which aim to conquer more space in the higher education market, reduce competition and increase profits.

The distance education modality has allowed raising the ratio between the number of students per teacher, in addition to reducing physical and human infrastructure costs. As a result, it enables large educational groups to significantly increase their profit margins.

The Census figures are significant when the 10 largest private higher education groups are taken into account: in 2020, 72.3% of enrollments of new entrants were made in distance courses and there was a significant reduction in enrollments in on-site courses: there were 1 71 million in 2018, a number that dropped to 1.48 million in 2020.

The huge concentration of enrollments in just 10 educational groups is even more impressive when we consider the performance obtained by their students in the National Student Performance Exam (Enade) of MEC/Inep: about 60% of distance education graduates come from courses with an Enade grade 1 or 2 (on a scale of 5) – a real calamity – while in their face-to-face courses this percentage drops to 39%.

It is worth remembering that distance learning courses require students to have a lot of intellectual autonomy and a habit of study. There are numerous activities for reading and interpreting complex texts in specific areas, which must be supported by well-designed and well-planned virtual activities and/or tutorials. Otherwise, they can leave gaps in training and even lead to dropout.

The pedagogical projects of distance education courses need to be well structured and financed if they aim at a consistent professional qualification. In addition, there are few opportunities for Ead students from large private groups to experience scientific initiation research, participation in extension projects and programs, debates, lectures, cultural and political events, etc.

It is important to highlight that, when taken seriously, distance education can offer quality courses, as shown by Enade results from students from different universities in Brazil and the quality of the offer in countless other parts of the world.

However, considering the evaluation of undergraduate courses and the training offered to young Brazilians, the strategy of large private groups of migrating their new enrollments to distance courses that, in general, have questionable quality, becomes politically, economically and pedagogically questionable. .

Young graduates from precarious training will certainly face more personal difficulties in entering a job and will be more likely to have a fragile performance in their daily work, which could harm the nation. It is noteworthy that among the careers with the highest proportion of distance learning offer are People Management (75.6%), Pedagogy (72.9%), Social Work (72.2%), Logistics (72.1%) , Physical Education (52.8%), Physical Education Degree (52.4%) and Accounting (51.0%).

Another worrying aspect is the 5% decrease in enrollments in face-to-face teaching at public institutions between 2019 and 2020: it went from 1.90 million to 1.80 million. Already in distance education, the number, although negligible, remained constant – about 157 thousand.

In an article published in the first quarter of this year, a strong growth of new students in distance education courses in public institutions was identified: from 32,500, in 2019, to 48,300 new students, in 2020, leading to believe that the public ones embraced EaD during the pandemic. Read mistake.

Enrollments in public distance courses represent a minimum percentage of the global offer: they were 2.0% in 2019 and rose to 2.4% in 2020. The growth is also insignificant when compared to what happened in the private ones.

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Most 2020 entrants to public institutions are linked to distance education courses funded mostly by some state governments. In addition, enrollments from institutions that depend only on funding from the Open University of Brazil (UAB – Capes/MEC) system, have a marginal share in total Ead income – around 1.0% in 2020.

A final concern is the 5% drop in total in-person enrollment in public schools between 2019 and 2020. Among new entrants, the drop was greater, at 9%. In these institutions, the average score of Enade is significantly higher than that of the 10 largest private groups, according to a study carried out by SoU_Ciência.

Given this scenario, it is at the very least to question whether there are beneficiaries of this enormous expansion of private distance education, in general poorly evaluated by the main official regulation instrument of the MEC, with the concomitant budget cut suffered by public institutions of high quality higher education. . What the MEC and Inep data show us is that we are putting the training of thousands of students at risk!

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