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Opinion – Sou Ciência: How much is a BRL 99.99 graduation worth for our youth?

In the last 25 years, higher education in Brazil has undergone a considerable expansion process. The number of enrollments increased fivefold, from 1.76 million in 1995 to 8.68 million in 2020, expanding access to this educational level for young people who were historically excluded from it. That should be excellent news.

But is it? To democratize little-known information about this growth and help Brazilian society to assess the quality of this expansion and its consequences for the future of the nation, SoU_Ciência launches this Friday (29), at 4 pm, a new Panel with data and analysis on the recent Expansion of Private Higher Education.

The focus on the private network is justified because the growth in enrollments in higher education occurred mainly in these institutions: in 1995, the private ones gathered around 60% of all enrollments and, in 2020, they started to have 77.5% – as shown by the historical series available in the Panel, based on data from the Higher Education Census and the National Student Performance Exam (Enade).

Furthermore, this increase was mainly concentrated in institutions linked to large for-profit educational groups and in distance learning courses. To give you an idea, we highlight here just some data for the year 2020:

Among all young people who entered higher education, 62% enrolled in institutions belonging to the ten largest for-profit private educational groups.

Distance courses received more than 53% of enrollments from new entrants, of which 83% were concentrated in the HEIs of these large private groups, showing that there is an important movement to replace presential enrollments with distance learning in these groups.

With regard to quality, almost half of the students in these large groups (47%) were enrolled in courses with a low rating in Enade, that is, grades 1 or 2, on a scale that goes from 1 to 5. This means that the young people who reach the end of these courses receive precarious training, according to the quality standard established by the Ministry of Education (MEC).

In these same institutions linked to large groups, only 42% of those who entered in 2018 were still enrolled at the end of 2019. That is, 58% of young people dropped out in the first two years of the course and were left without any training.

It is worth noting that many of these young people need to take on debt to pay for enrollment, tuition and daily maintenance expenses, and they remain in debt even after dropping out of their courses.

Another worrying fact is the territorial distribution of vacancies in distance learning courses. This offer is mostly located at the institutions' headquarters, with 80% of students enrolled in courses located in just 10 municipalities in five states (São Paulo, Santa Catarina, Rio de Janeiro, Paraná and Mato Grosso do Sul). This calls into question the understanding that distance learning is good, because it reaches the corners of the country, democratizing access to higher education.

Taking this tragic scenario into account, the possible answers to the question that gives title to this text are: frustration, indebtedness and precariousness, the opposite of the promise of personal and professional training that aims to benefit the social, cultural and economic development of Brazil.

Our Ministry of Education has allowed this type of expansion, concentrated in institutions that have a business model eminently focused on profits, without imposing efficient regulation to control the quality of the courses offered and protect our young people from various deceptions.

Some of these private universities were allowed to go public on the Stock Exchange and ended up turning their goals to the interests of the financial market, instead of education.

These elements show the need to closely follow the directions of Brazilian Higher Education and the policies that configure it and that should privilege the right of everyone to a present and a future of quality and hope for all of us.

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