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Opinion – Sou Ciência: Federal universities face budgetary nightmare

Brazil currently has 68 federal universities, not counting federal institutes of technical and technological education. We are talking about a system built from decades of work, which has gone through several governments – some with more support and others less. Given the current reality, it is no exaggeration to say that the country is experiencing one of the worst, if not the worst, times for its universities.

Contradictorily, these same institutions resist and continue not only to survive, but also to face the pandemic with actions and solutions, as shown by the SoU_Science Panel of Universities in Defense of Life. At the same time, we also know that the federal universities appear as the best Brazilian universities, as well as the highest quality institutions in Latin America.

A paradox, but one that has an explanation. Federal universities constitute a system that has undergone an intense process of expansion and have a high-level workforce that gained some vitality from the expansion that took place, but unfinished, between the years 2007 to 2014.

The question we are currently asking is: how much longer will these universities, responsible for much of the research developed for the benefit of the nation, be able to survive in the face of budget cuts? The feeling that passes through everyone is of a nightmare that seems to have no end.

Started in 2015, the crunch in the funding of federal universities took unimaginable proportions and reached the most dramatic levels. These data were clearly evidenced in our Funding Panel, and are available to all. With a methodology established based on years of study and work by Professor Nelson Amaral, a researcher at SoU_Ciência and also president of Fineduca, the values ??corrected by the IPCA showed a drop of more than 50% in the Other Current Expenses category and of 96% in investment.

As Other Current Expenses means the funding resources for the payment of day-to-day expenses, in addition to charges and fees and debt services. Personnel expenses, which are not discretionary, are not included. As investment budgetmeans any resource that can, that is, that is authorized to be spent on equipment, renovations, construction and even books.

It is difficult to imagine a university without resources to buy books, without maintaining basic structures such as electrical wiring or even without resources to purchase equipment for training or research.

The situation worsens when we imagine that the resources are also not enough to pay for water, energy and security in these institutions. The SoU_Ciência panel is the full demonstration of the scenario faced by our federal universities. Although some face greater severity, all of them present important difficulties.

Last week we had the news that relevant higher education institutions will be able to stop in a month. Not because they will go on strike or “riot”, as a certain minister said, but because they won’t be able to pay the bills. A constant threat over the last three years, but now exacerbated even more by the lack of perspective imposed by the cuts that have already occurred and the announcement of others to come.

Until recently, the argument for negligence with public higher education was the Ceiling of Spending, which could not be “pierced”. However, faced with the outrageous declaration by the current minister of the economy, that the spending ceiling was “violated, but with fiscal responsibility”, we can only assume that the way in which Brazilian universities and science have been treated is really part of a project.

What the current rulers have not yet realized, or continue to underestimate, is that the population wants more than emergency aid. Brazilians want their universities and science at full speed, as they know that what they produce is part of everyone’s public patrimony, and that such institutions are not merely subordinate to economic or electoral interests. It is urgent to reverse this neglect in order to rebuild Brazil by strengthening public higher education.

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