DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21879/faeeba2358-0194.2025.v34.n79.p77-95

DROPOUT AND RETENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPANDING THE THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

*Uyguaciara Veloso Castelo Branco**
Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3595-1415

*Cassiano Caon Amorim***
University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3326-8524

*José Jorge Lima Dias Júnior****
Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4381-1930

ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss the theoretical and methodological elements necessary for comprehending the categories of evasion and retention within Brazilian higher education. These concepts are viewed dialectically, considering their dynamic roles in addressing the challenges related to national higher education data. We analyze microdata from the Higher Education Census (MEC/INEP) and higher education flow indicators, employing a quali-quantitative approach. The findings are compiled and presented through graphs and tables. For the calculation of annual evasion, we utilized the Ecograd/Andifes formula, with a temporal scope of 2013-2023. Conversely, for the cumulative evasion and retention rates, the analysis focused on students who entered between 2013 and 2019, with their status recorded in 2023. The article highlights the significant contribution of student trajectory indicators as instruments for understanding permanence dynamics in higher education. By exploring segments based on modality, legal nature, and the temporal context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the analysis underscores the need for more nuanced and contextualized approaches to interpreting these indicators, thereby proposing avenues for future research.
Keywords: Higher Education; Higher Education Census; Student Dropout; Public Higher Education Institution; Private Higher Education Institution.

* PhD in History from the Federal University of Pernambuco. Full Professor at the Federal University of Paraíba and permanent faculty member of the Graduate Program in Public Policy, Management, and Evaluation (PPGAVE). Academic Coordinator at the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies (PROGRAD) at UFPB. João Pessoa, PB, Brazil.
E-mail: uyguaciara@gmail.com

** PhD in Sciences (Human Geography) from the University of São Paulo. Associate Professor at the School of Education, Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF). Permanent faculty member of the Graduate Program in Education (PPGE/UFJF) and of the Professional Graduate Program in Public Education Management and Evaluation (PPGP/CAEd/UFJF). Juiz de Fora, MG, Brazil. E-mail: cassianoamorim@hotmail.com

*** PhD in Administration from the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). Associate Professor in the Department of Administration at UFPB and permanent faculty member of the Graduate Program in Administration (PPGA/UFPB). Founder and Leader of the Laboratory for Management and Data Intelligence (LAGID). João Pessoa, PB, Brazil.
E-mail: jorge.dias@academico.ufpb.br

RESUMO

EVASÃO E RETENÇÃO NO ENSINO SUPERIOR: AMPLIANDO A COMPREENSÃO TEÓRICO-METODOLÓGICA

O artigo tem por objetivo discutir elementos teórico-metodológicos necessários para a compreensão das categorias evasão e retenção, pensadas, dialeticamente, na dinâmica e equacionamento dos problemas que envolvem os dados da educação superior no país. São analisados microdados do Censo da Educação Superior (MEC/INEP) e indicadores de fluxo da educação superior, com enfoque quali-quantitativo, que foram compilados e apresentados sob a forma de gráficos e tabelas. Para o cálculo da evasão anual, utilizamos a fórmula do Ecograd/Andifes, no recorte temporal 2013-2023. Já para o cálculo da taxa de evasão e retenção acumulada, o recorte foi de ingressantes de 2013 a 2019, com situação em 2023. O artigo evidencia a contribuição dos indicadores de trajetória estudantil como instrumentos para a compreensão das dinâmicas de permanência no ensino superior. Ao explorar recortes por modalidade, natureza jurídica e marco temporal da pandemia de Covid-19, a análise reforça a necessidade de abordagens mais qualificadas e contextualizadas para a leitura desses indicadores, propondo caminhos para investigações futuras.

Palavras-chave: Educação Superior. Censo da Educação Superior. Evasão Escolar. Instituição Pública de Educação Superior. Instituição Privada de Educação Superior.

RESUMEN

DESERCIÓN Y RETENCIÓN EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: AMPLIANDO LA COMPRENSIÓN TEÓRICO-METODOLÓGICA

Este artículo tiene como objetivo discutir los elementos teóricos y metodológicos necesarios para comprender las categorías de deserción y retención en la educación superior brasileña. Estos conceptos se abordan dialécticamente, considerando sus roles dinámicos frente a los desafíos relacionados con los datos nacionales de educación superior. Se analizan los microdatos del Censo de Educación Superior (MEC/INEP) y los indicadores de flujo de la educación superior, utilizando un enfoque cuali-cuantitativo. Los resultados se recopilan y presentan mediante gráficos y tablas. Para el cálculo de la deserción anual, se empleó la fórmula de Ecograd/Andifes, con un alcance temporal de 2013 a 2023. Por otro lado, para las tasas acumuladas de deserción y retención, el análisis se centró en los estudiantes que ingresaron entre 2013 y 2019, considerando su situación en el año 2023. El artículo destaca la importante contribución de los indicadores de trayectoria estudiantil como instrumentos para comprender las dinámicas de permanencia en la educación superior. Al explorar segmentos según la modalidad, la naturaleza jurídica y el contexto temporal de la pandemia de COVID-19, el análisis subraya la necesidad de enfoques más matizados y contextualizados para la interpretación de estos indicadores, proponiendo así vías para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: Educación superior. Censo de Educación Superior. Abandono escolar. Institución Pública de Educación Superior. Institución Privada de Educación Superior.

Opening Remarks [1]

In the present day, it is essential to bring into the public debate issues related to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Brazil, particularly by focusing on a specific group of institutions classified as universities. As Saramago (2013) states, the social role of education is to cultivate an open mind, with mastery of concepts and knowledge about human societies, their contradictions, and their history, as well as about the collective past and the individual and plural present—elements that are intrinsically linked to territorial dimensions.

In Western culture, the university is regarded as the privileged space for the production and dissemination of the highest forms of knowledge, in both pure and applied domains. However, throughout its diverse and long history, universities and other HEIs have not always fulfilled this mission, and, at times, other organizations have surpassed them in the task of creating and disseminating new knowledge (Rossato, 1998). In certain historical periods, the very foundations of the university were challenged—not only its creative function but even its very reason for existence (Castelo Branco, 2005).

Nevertheless, as an original product of Western thought, despite its vicissitudes, the university has remained an integral element of Western civilization and continues to be a powerful space for the development of intellectual culture. Experience shows that the world, as we conceive it today, cannot dispense with the university as an institution.

Although it emerged relatively late in Brazilian territory (Amorim, 2012), when compared to its origins in Western Europe or even to other Latin American countries, the Brazilian university has withstood numerous challenges and continues to serve as a privileged space for the civic and professional formation of young people and adults. It is also the locus of more than 95% of the research conducted in Brazil, according to data from the Brazilian Academy of Sciences (2019), with public universities—particularly federal and state institutions—holding a prominent position (Moura, 2019). According to data from the 2023 Higher Education Census (Brazil, 2024), the country has 2,580 Higher Education Institutions. The university category accounts for a total of 205 institutions, of which 56.5%, or 116, are public universities.

Other data reveal the scale of this relatively young Brazilian institution: the university. Considering total enrollment in Brazilian higher education, the 205 universities in the country account for only 7.9% of all HEIs. However, these institutions concentrate 53.1% of undergraduate enrollments, according to data from INEP (2024).

As a historical, social, and territorial phenomenon, the presence of the university and the impact of its existence on society must always be assessed through systematic investigation. In the Brazilian context, data organized from the Higher Education Census have been essential for the development of policies and actions that are indispensable to institutional advancement, as well as to the improvement of ongoing initiatives.

For a contemporary analysis of phenomena pertaining to the reality of Brazilian higher education, the database compiled by INEP has been fundamental in supporting research and informing actions and policies aimed at increasing academic effectiveness, efficiency, and quality. A closer reading of the Higher Education Census reports reveals, for example, a set of circumstances that portray a current scenario requiring careful reflection. This includes an analysis that takes into account the COVID-19 pandemic, a phenomenon that significantly impacted enrollment, dropout, student retention, temporary withdrawal, academic persistence, and student success across different undergraduate programs. This reality has brought considerable challenges to the management of universities and other HEIs.

When analyzing the current state of Brazilian higher education, it is also necessary to

1 Text translated and revised by Lucas Possatti de Oliveira.

consider the period—now concluded—of the National Education Plan (NEP) 2014–2024, particularly Goal 12. This goal aimed to expand access to undergraduate programs by increasing the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) to 50% and the Net Enrollment Ratio (NER) to 33% for the population aged 18 to 24. Goal 12 also stipulated that at least 40% of the enrollment expansion should take place in the public sector, thereby ensuring the quality of provision.

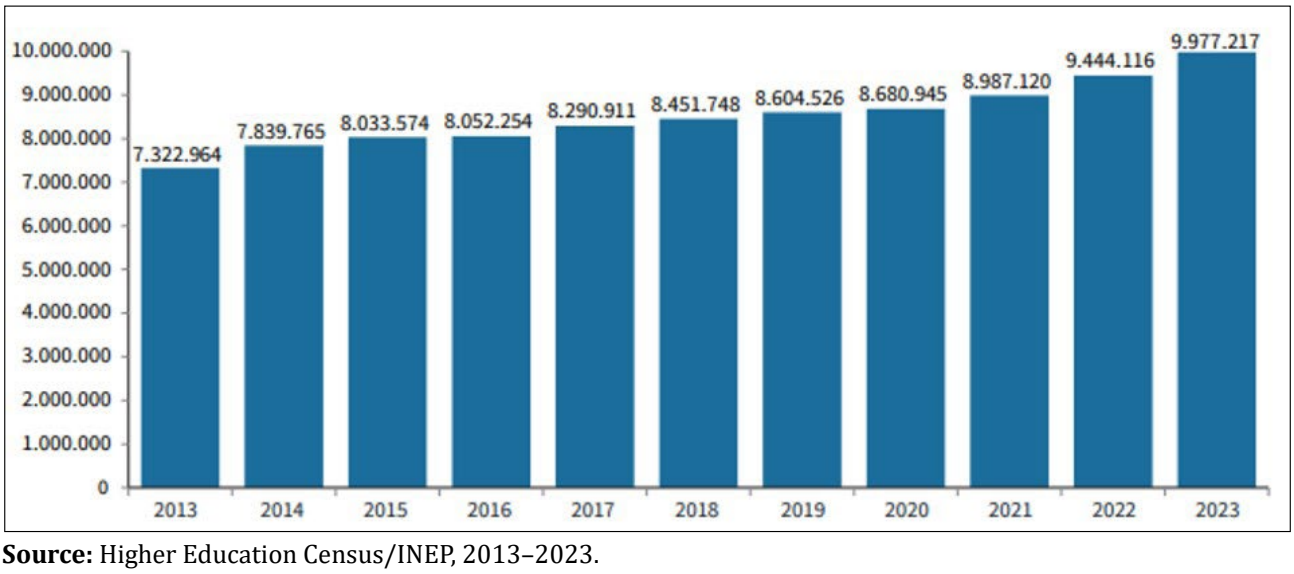
The discrepancy between what was planned and approved in the NEP and what was achieved indicates a systemic failure in the implementation capacity of higher education policies. This shortfall is not only reflected in the total numbers, but—more critically—in the minimal contribution of the public sector to this expansion, despite policy advances in the area. Public sector enrollments grew by only 3.6%, a figure that contradicts the very principle of the goal, which sought to strengthen public provision as the primary driver of expanded access, particularly for the most vulnerable segments of the population.

With a multifactorial nature, the failure to meet the goal exposes the fragility of growth in the public sector in contrast to the accelerated and robust expansion of the private sector in offering higher education opportunities. The lack of public investment in the expansion and consolidation of federal universities and institutes — which, due to changes in policy management and the resulting crises, have been subject to budget cuts and the deterioration of their infrastructure — is compounded by a widespread narrative of devaluation of scientific production and higher education, giving space for the advancement of private initiatives of a market-oriented nature, especially with the massive quantity of distance learning courses.

To provide evidence for our analysis, we considered the 4th NEP Monitoring Cycle Report (INEP), published in 2022, through which we identified that, in the historical series from 2012 to 2021, there is a clear trend of growth in the population coverage rates of undergraduate programs. However, this growth has occurred at a pace far below what would be required to achieve the targets set for completion by 2024, as already noted. During the period analyzed, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) rose from 30% to 37.4%, while the Net Enrollment Ratio (NER) fluctuated from 19.5% to 25.5%. Yet, considering only the growth in the public sector during this period, there was an increase of just 3.6% in undergraduate enrollments.

Regarding higher education more broadly, Figure 1 shows a systematic increase in the number of enrolled students when considering both public and private universities, as well as growth across all modalities (on-campus and distance education).

Figure 1 – Enrollments in Brazilian higher education



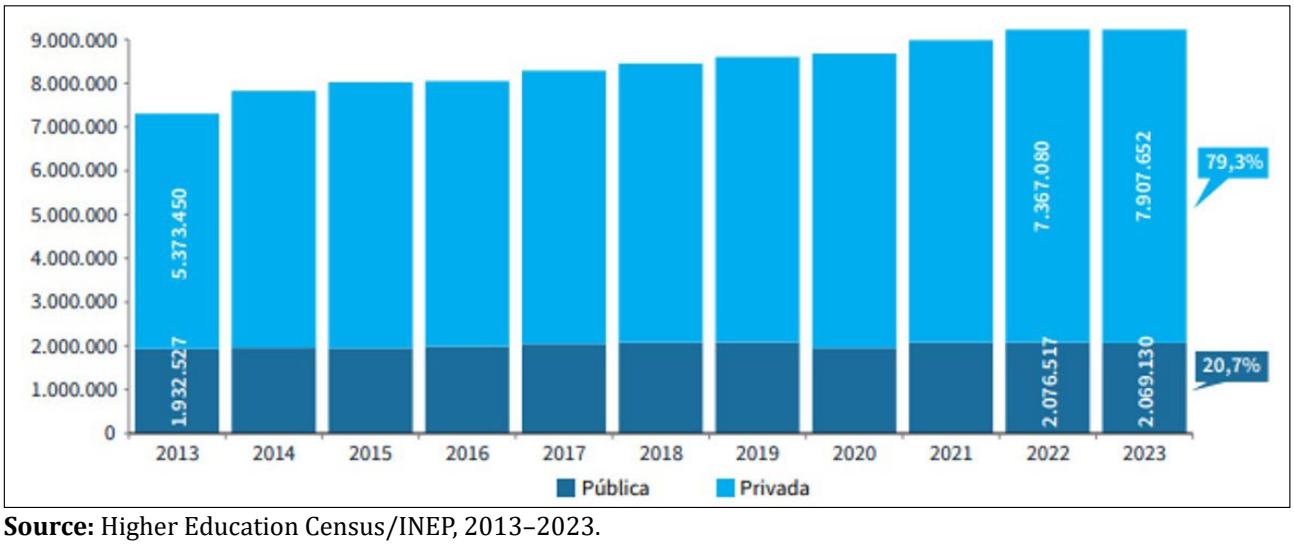
Source: Higher Education Census/INEP, 2013–2023.

Data from the Higher Education Census also reveal continued enrollment growth in private institutions, with particular emphasis on the distance education (DE) modality. In 2018, nearly 3.5 million students entered Brazilian higher education, with 2.1 million enrolling in on-campus programs and 1.4 million in DE programs. Of this total, 573,000 students began their higher education studies in public institutions.

By 2023, data from the Higher Education Census show just over 4.9 million entrants into undergraduate programs, with 1.6 million in on-campus courses and 3.3 million in DE courses. Of this total, approximately 569,000 students entered public institutions—around 11% of the total. Although there has been modest growth in the post-pandemic period, these figures confirm the difficulty in meeting the third indicator of Goal 12 of the National Education Plan (NEP), which calls for an expansion of provision in the public sector[2].

As illustrated in Figure 2, the census data show that the number of entrants in public HEIs (municipal, state, and federal) has remained stable, while enrollment in the private sector has grown, even during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2 – Percentage of undergraduate enrollments, by administrative category – 2013–2023



Source: Higher Education Census/INEP, 2013–2023.

As previously discussed, even considering the global COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), enrollment in Brazilian higher education continued to grow, reaching 8,604,526 students in 2019, as illustrated in Figure 1. In 2020, this figure totaled 8,680,945 undergraduates, and by 2023 it had risen to 9,977,217. This growth occurred primarily in private and community institutions, as shown in Figure 2, especially in distance education (DE) programs. It is important to note that, in 2019, public HEIs enrolled 2,080,146 undergraduate students. In 2020, this number fell to 1,956,352, and in 2021 it reached 2,078,661, according to the INEP report (Brazil, 2024).

A decrease in the number of students enrolled in public HEIs during the pandemic can be attributed to various factors, including the financial difficulties faced by families, lack of access to technology, and uncertainty about the future of education (Gusso *et al.*, 2020). Many institutions adopted, as a strategy, the non-mandatory enrollment in courses during academic terms throughout the pandemic—a measure that may have affected these figures. This policy was supported by Provisional Measure (PM) No. 934/2020, which established "[...] exceptional rules on the school year in

2 "Goal 12 - Increase the gross enrollment rate in higher education to 50% (fifty percent) and the net rate to 33% (thirty-three percent) of the population aged 18 (eighteen) to 24 (twenty-four), ensuring the quality of the offer and expansion to at least 40% (forty percent) of new enrollments, in the public sector." (Brazil, 2014).

basic and higher education arising from measures to address the public health emergency situation referred to in Law No. 13,979 of February 6, 2020" (Brazil, 2020a). The PM was later converted into Law No. 14,040/2020 (Brazil, 2020b), and subsequently extended through Federal Law No. 14,218/2021 (Brazil, 2021).

The pandemic introduced a set of new challenges for HEIs: the suspension of in-person activities; the adoption of new technologies for the delivery of remote education; difficulties in accessing online classes; the digital exclusion of part of the student population; the resumption of in-person classes with the need to make up for practical sessions across different academic calendars; lack of institutional infrastructure and teacher training, among others (Gusso *et al.*, 2020; Caldeira *et al.*, 2024). These challenges led to a significant number of course withdrawals and, in many cases, higher dropout and retention rates. Several studies conducted after the resumption of in-person activities indicate that many students were forced to withdraw or abandon their courses due to financial hardship, inadequate resources to follow online classes, mental health issues, and other circumstances experienced both inside and outside the HEI environment (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020; Nunes, 2021; Carneiro & Andrade, 2022).

With the return to in-person activities, various measures have been taken to address the situations caused by the need for social distancing and remote teaching (Caldeira *et al.*, 2024). The Brazilian government and HEIs have implemented actions to minimize the pandemic's impact on the sector, such as offering scholarships, creating emergency aid programs, expanding internet access, facilitating the acquisition of electronic devices, and adopting new teaching and learning methodologies (Carneiro, Andrade & Sampaio, 2022). Across Brazilian HEIs, difficulties remain in aligning academic calendars between courses considered more theoretical and those that had to suspend practical activities during the pandemic due to the lack of conditions to offer in-person laboratory classes. This reality is particularly evident in health-related programs, which were highly impacted by the restrictions on the use of clinical facilities during the pandemic (Carneiro, Andrade & Sampaio, 2022).

It is worth noting that the 2023 Higher Education Census (INEP) indicates that 73% of the places offered in public HEIs were filled, compared to 22.1% in the private sector. The challenges of access, retention, and dropout become even more complex when considering the significant number of unfilled places, especially in public institutions. Even though the Census points to a 7.7% growth in the total number of graduates in public HEIs and 6.6% in private institutions, the gap between the number of entrants and graduates remains large — a concerning phenomenon.

This scenario presents yet another challenge: the need to expand and deepen the debate around fundamental analytical categories for the development of public policies, actions, programs, and projects related to Brazilian higher education – particularly concerning student access, retention, and success in undergraduate programs. The post-pandemic context reinforces the urgency of discussing student entry, qualified retention, and graduation in Brazilian higher education. This discussion is already present in the National Education Conference (CONAE)[3] through studies on the new National Education Plan (NEP). However, Law No. 14,934/2024 "Extends, until December 31, 2025, the validity of the National Education Plan, approved through Law No. 13,005 of June 25, 2014" does not address several of the difficulties and challenges previously identified in this study (Brazil, 2024).

3 News published at: https://www.gov.br/mec/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2024/fevereiro/conae-prepara-documento-base-do-novo-pne. Accessed on: September 19, 2024.

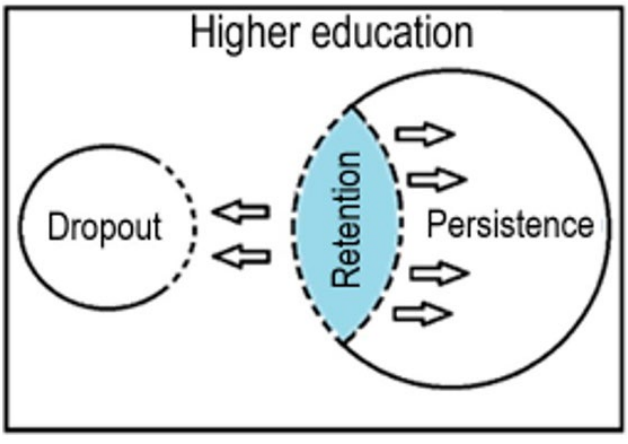
The preparation of this paper[4] seeks to contribute to this debate during such a challenging post-pandemic period. Its objective is to discuss the theoretical and methodological foundations of the categories of dropout and retention—understood dialectically as complementary categories—by presenting their qualitative and quantitative relationship with data from the Higher Education Census and reflecting on the issues affecting the daily life of Higher Education Institutions and the challenges of their management.

Brief Theoretical Review of the Analytical Categories – Dropout, Retention, and Persistence

When discussing the analytical categories necessary for a better understanding of the current context of higher education, we encounter an important crossroads: the contradiction between dropout and persistence. This contradiction, in its interrelation, brings the issue of retention as an explanatory factor for both problems. Retention serves as an analytical element that can either exacerbate dropout rates — if left unmonitored or neglected — or create a misleading picture of prolonged persistence (*ad infinitum*), burdening public (especially) and private systems with students who are unable to achieve academic success by completing their undergraduate degrees.

To better map the characteristics and analytical elements, it is necessary to theoretically define what is meant by both dropout and persistence, highlighting the interconnections between them, which we refer to as retention. This understanding can be represented through the diagram illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Conceptual model of the concepts of persistence, dropout, and retention



Fonte: Authors' own elaboration, 2025.

From the diagram, we understand that the phenomenon of retention can either lead to future student dropout or extend persistence, giving it a more prolonged character. To contribute more effectively to deepening this debate, we present several authors who address the topics of dropout, persistence, and retention, offering definitions that go beyond the literal meaning of the words and reflecting on their implications and consequences—in terms of policies and processes—throughout students' academic trajectories.

Initially, dropout is defined as any interruption in the study cycle (Gaioso, 2005). However, this simplistic definition requires further refinement by incorporating characteristics specific to higher education in order to accurately map dropout patterns within the system.

In this regard, Silva Filho *et al.* (2007, p. 642) define average annual dropout as "[...] the percentage of students enrolled in an education system, in an HEI, or in a course, who, without having graduated, also did not enroll in the following year (or the following semester [...]". The same author excludes from the definition of total dropout those students with active enrollment after the time frame considered for course completion, defining it instead as "[...] the number of students who, having entered a particular course, HEI, or education system, did not obtain a diploma after a certain number of years. It is the complement of what is called the

4 The article is part of the Project entitled "Acesso, permanência e evasão na educação superior: políticas e práticas nas instituições e trajetórias" [Access, permanence, and attrition in higher education: policies and practices in institutions and trajectories], funded by CNPq (Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development).

graduation rate [...]" (Silva Filho *et al.*, 2007, p. 642, emphasis added).

The Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) defines two forms of dropout: course dropout, referring to a student leaving an undergraduate program without completing it, and system dropout, which occurs when the student abandons higher education entirely—thus broadening the scope of analysis. Building on this reasoning, an intermediate concept can be added: institutional dropout, meaning the abandonment of a given institution by the student, which should take into account mobility between programs within the same institution (MEC, 1996). This latter definition is close to what Cardoso (2008) calls apparent dropout, which considers mobility from one program to another, distinguishing it from what the author calls real dropout, where the student leaves higher education altogether — consistent with the MEC's (1996) definition of system dropout.

Still in pursuit of a clearer definition of dropout, Silva Filho *et al.* (2007) describe annual dropout as the difference between the number of students enrolled in a given reference year compared to the previous year, while total dropout compares the number of students enrolled in a program in a specific year of entry with the final number of graduates from that same program at the end of the standard completion period.

To address some of the problems identified in these definitions, Barbosa (2023), in her master's thesis, proposes the concept of cumulative dropout, which considers a specific year as the starting point of the analysis period. From that year onward, the ideal (or expected) number of enrollments is calculated for subsequent years until the final year of the selected period. The formula used by the author for calculating the Cumulative Dropout Rate (CDR) for a given period is: **CDR = 1 – CER**.

To calculate this formula, the ideal enrollment (Ei) in a given year (n) is obtained by subtracting the number of graduates (G) in the previous year (n-1) from the actual enrollment (Ea) in that same year (n-1), and then adding the number of new entrants (N) in the current year (n): $\mathbf{Ei_n = (Ea_{n-1} - G_{n-1}) + N_n}$

To determine the ideal enrollment for the final year of the period (Eif), the Cumulative Enrollment Rate (CER) is calculated by dividing actual enrollment in the final year (Eaf) by the ideal enrollment in the final year (Eif): **CER = Eaf / Eif**. Once CER is obtained, the CDR for that period can be calculated.

The use of a CDR offers an interesting advantage in that it allows for comparisons between HEIs and is less sensitive to fluctuations caused by atypical events, making it more reliable within the chosen time frame. It is, however, evident that comparing HEIs requires caution, with critical attention to local and regional characteristics as well as internal and external factors affecting institutions. Public policies for higher education, for example, can lead to greater or lesser budgetary constraints, directly impacting institutional policies for student support and the funding of academic programs, scholarships, and initiatives for tracking student trajectories.

Continuing our theoretical discussion, we turn to the category of retention or prolonged persistence, defined as the occurrence in which a student takes "[...] longer than the expected time to complete the program, which compromises the success rate, generates underutilization of human and material resources, and may lead to student dropout" (Pereira, 2013, p. 17). It is also important to note the disadvantages for students themselves, who face difficulties with course scheduling, enrollment logistics, and related issues—as well as the financial and managerial burdens on institutions, as pointed out by Pereira (2013), and on society at large. In such cases, the HEI retains a place occupied by a student who neither frees that spot for new entrants nor returns to society the benefits of the knowledge and training that were—or should have been—provided (Aragão, 2021).

These considerations highlight the importance of continuously monitoring students'

academic performance in order to identify possible disruptions in academic progress, such as delays caused by course withdrawals or failures, which serve as indicators of retention and thus "[...] enable the mapping of prolonged persistence or act as a warning sign for potential dropout" (Andrade & Teixeira, 2017, p. 515).

Ultimately, the phenomenon of retention generates social and financial costs for HEIs by keeping students enrolled for longer than the planned or expected duration of the program. There is also a moral challenge in enforcing academic dismissal regulations, as institutions often adopt more flexible approaches to maximum completion times due to demands from governing bodies and the university community's willingness to consider mitigating circumstances in students' performance.

In her master's thesis, Aragão (2021) presents a study on the phenomenon of retention at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) among students supported by Student Assistance (SA) programs who exceeded the minimum time required for course completion. The study found a pattern of course failures and/or withdrawals, including in final-year courses of these students' undergraduate programs.

Retention is also monitored through the Higher Education Flow Indicators, developed by MEC/INEP, which consist of a longitudinal follow-up of undergraduate students' trajectories – from entry into the system to their exit, whether by program completion or withdrawal. The aim is to provide parameters for monitoring course efficiency; to better align supply and demand; and to inform discussions on the effectiveness of the higher education system in its capacity to graduate students[5]. These flow indicators take the undergraduate program as the unit of analysis and classify students into three possible statuses: persistence[6], dropout[7], and completion[8] in their original program of entry.

For use as a basis in analyzing students' academic trajectories by program/institution, data are available for cohorts entering from 2010 to 2019 and exiting up to 2023, providing the Persistence Rate (PR), Cumulative Completion Rate (CCR), Cumulative Dropout Rate (CDR), Annual Completion Rate (ACR), and Annual Dropout Rate (ADR) (Santos, 2023).

When addressing the concept of retention as prolonged persistence, it becomes necessary to distinguish it from what we define as qualified persistence. This is understood as progress and completion within the expected time frame for the undergraduate program, ensuring the quality of training and empowering students through the expansion of their cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2015).

Qualified persistence, in this sense, fosters successful program completion on schedule, which in turn enables upward social and economic mobility—particularly for socially vulnerable groups—through formal education, improving employability and, in some successful cases, ensuring entry into the labor market for higher education graduates (Munhoz, 2005). Clearly, such entry into the professional sector is itself a significant challenge, depending on market conditions and the alignment—or lack thereof—between the careers offered by HEIs and the needs of the labor market.

5 Available at: https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/dados-abertos/indicadores-educacionais/indicadores-de-fluxo-da-educacao-superior. Accessed on: August 17, 2023.

6 "Corresponds to students who have active ties with their entry course in a given reference year." (Available at: https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/dados-abertos/indicadores-educacionais/indicadores-de-fluxo-da-educacao-superior. Accessed on: August 17, 2023).

7 "Corresponds to students who end their link with their entry course in a given reference year, either through disengagement or transfer to another course at the same higher education institution." (Available at: https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/dados-abertos/indicadores-educacionais/indicadores-de-fluxo-da-educacao-superior. Accessed on: August 17, 2023).

8 "Corresponds to students who graduate from their entry course in a given reference year." (Available at: https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/dados-abertos/indicadores-educacionais/indicadores-de-fluxo-da-educacao-superior. Accessed on: August 17, 2023).

It is important to note the need for a dedicated research and intervention space capable of identifying and discussing emerging careers, new fields of knowledge, and the characteristics of the labor market in today's technological world (Maués & Camargo, 2014; Zuccarelli, 2021; Vieira, Honorato & Rodrigues, 2022).

Returning to the discussion on guaranteeing qualified persistence, it is essential to identify effective measures for monitoring and evaluating HEIs to ensure that students—who may have gained access but lack financial, social, cultural, or psychological resources to remain—do not ultimately become part of the discouraging dropout statistics (Castelo Branco, 2013).

There is a rich body of discussion among researchers (Castelo Branco, 2022; Zago, 2006; Catani, Hey & Gilioli, 2006; Felicetti & Morosini, 2009) about the need to build a robust theoretical foundation for understanding and measuring the dimensions and nuances of the persistence category. This involves mapping indicators and/or factors that reveal the difficulties students face in remaining enrolled in HEIs. Understanding these indicators can serve as an important management and evaluation tool for HEIs, with the recommendation that such work be expanded to include the possibility of conducting both case studies and comparative studies.

Among the factors correlated with persistence, the following stand out: lack of financial resources (Zago, 2006); academic issues, such as expectations regarding the program or the institution the student is attending, which may either increase or decrease motivation to remain enrolled, thereby making program completion a priority—or not—in their life (Silva Filho *et al.*, 2007); the absence or limited acquisition of cultural capital throughout the student's life trajectory (Gisi, 2006; Baggi & Lopes, 2011); the overlap of multiple factors—personal, sociocultural, and economic (Kira, 1998; Braga, Peixoto & Bogutchi, 2003); the existence of factors inherent to students or external to the institution, such as economic, social, cultural, and individual variables; and those factors related to the institution or internal in nature, such as the structure and dynamics of a program, which should be studied together to better understand the process (Ronsoni, 2014). Finally, there is the reality faced by working students, who out of necessity attempt to reconcile employment and study, and must survive on the modest and limited aid provided by their institution's student assistance policies (Zago, Pereira & Paixão, 2015).

Method

To obtain the dropout indicator, we propose two calculation methods: the first uses data from the Higher Education Census to produce an annual rate, and the second is based on the higher education flow indicators to produce a cumulative rate, both provided by INEP. It is important to note that, using Census data alone, it is not possible to directly calculate the retention rate, since these data present only annual enrollment snapshots without tracking students' longitudinal trajectories. On the other hand, the higher education flow indicators—based on cohorts of entrants and their academic status over time—allow for a more accurate calculation of both the dropout rate and the retention rate, as they identify students who remain in the program beyond the expected completion time.

For the calculation of the annual dropout rate, we adopt the formula used in the Ecograd Project[9] (Dias Jr. *et al.*, 2025).

$$\text{Annual Dropout Rate} = 1 - \frac{\text{Enrolled}_n - \text{NewEntrants}_n}{\text{Enrolled}_{n-1} - \text{Graduates}_{n-1}}$$

9 Available at: ecograd.ufpb.br. Accessed on: February 10, 2024.

Unlike other approaches that disregard students with temporarily suspended enrollment, we chose to include them, along with actively enrolled students, as part of the group still linked to the institution. We understand that suspension (temporary enrollment suspension) does not necessarily represent dropout but rather a temporary interruption in the academic trajectory, with the possibility of returning in subsequent terms. This choice seeks to more accurately reflect student dynamics and avoid overestimating dropout rates.

As the time frame for this analysis, we consider the period from 2013 to 2023, using as a reference the targets proposed in the National Education Plan (NEP 2014–2024). The end of the analysis period coincides with the most recent year for which Higher Education Census data are available (2023).

The second method for calculating dropout uses data from the higher education flow indicators provided by INEP. In this approach, we consider the cohort of entrants from 2013 to 2019, observing their final academic status in 2023. The dropout rate corresponds to the ratio between the cumulative number of students who dropped out by 2023 and the total number of entrants in the period. Similarly, the retention rate is calculated based on the cumulative number of students who remain enrolled beyond the expected time for program completion, while the graduation rate is calculated based on the number of students who completed their degrees in the same period. This procedure offers a more accurate measurement of dropout and retention by tracking students' academic trajectories longitudinally over time.

It is important to note that, in both Census data and flow indicators, calculations for dropout, retention, and graduation are performed at the program level. This means it is not possible to capture patterns of student mobility between programs or institutions—such as internal transfers, external transfers, or reentries—which may lead to an overestimation of dropout rates and limit a comprehensive understanding of academic trajectories in the higher education system.

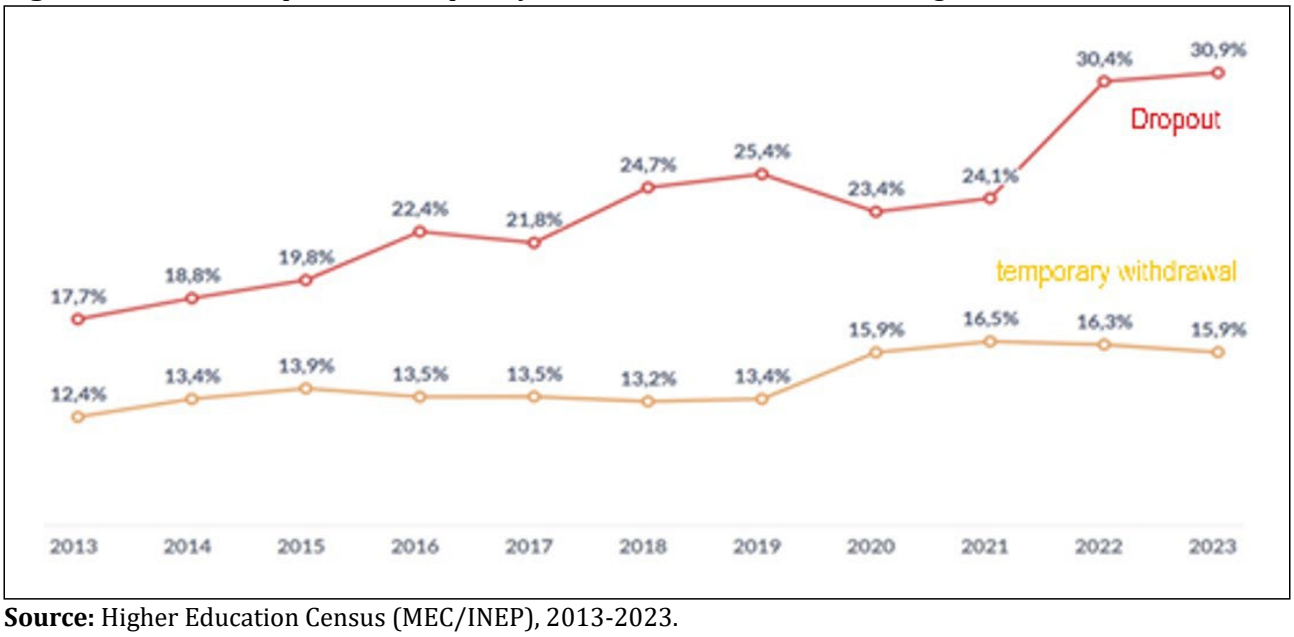
The analysis incorporating the time frame of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as comparisons across different institutional categories – such as mode of delivery and legal status of the institution – was used in this study as a strategy to explore the meanings and implications of student trajectory indicators. Although these aspects are not the central focus of the article, we understand that they provide important interpretive insights, especially given the significant impact of the pandemic on the educational environment, affecting student attendance, academic performance, and conditions for persistence and retention at all levels of education.

Analysis and Discussion

To support our reflections, Figure 4 initially presents the annual dropout rate, which has been increasing in recent years. For this analysis, we consider the period from 2013 to 2023. Within this time frame, it is possible to observe that the annual rate of temporary withdrawal remained virtually stable between 2014 and 2019, with an increase in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic directly affected students' daily lives, creating difficulties in attending and remaining in classes – particularly in the remote learning modality – which required adequate infrastructure at home, such as broadband internet access, computers, tablets, or even higher-quality smartphones to keep up with academic activities.

Considering the full time frame of the study, there is a strong correlation between the increase in the annual dropout rate and the substantial growth of the distance education (DE) modality, which has shown higher

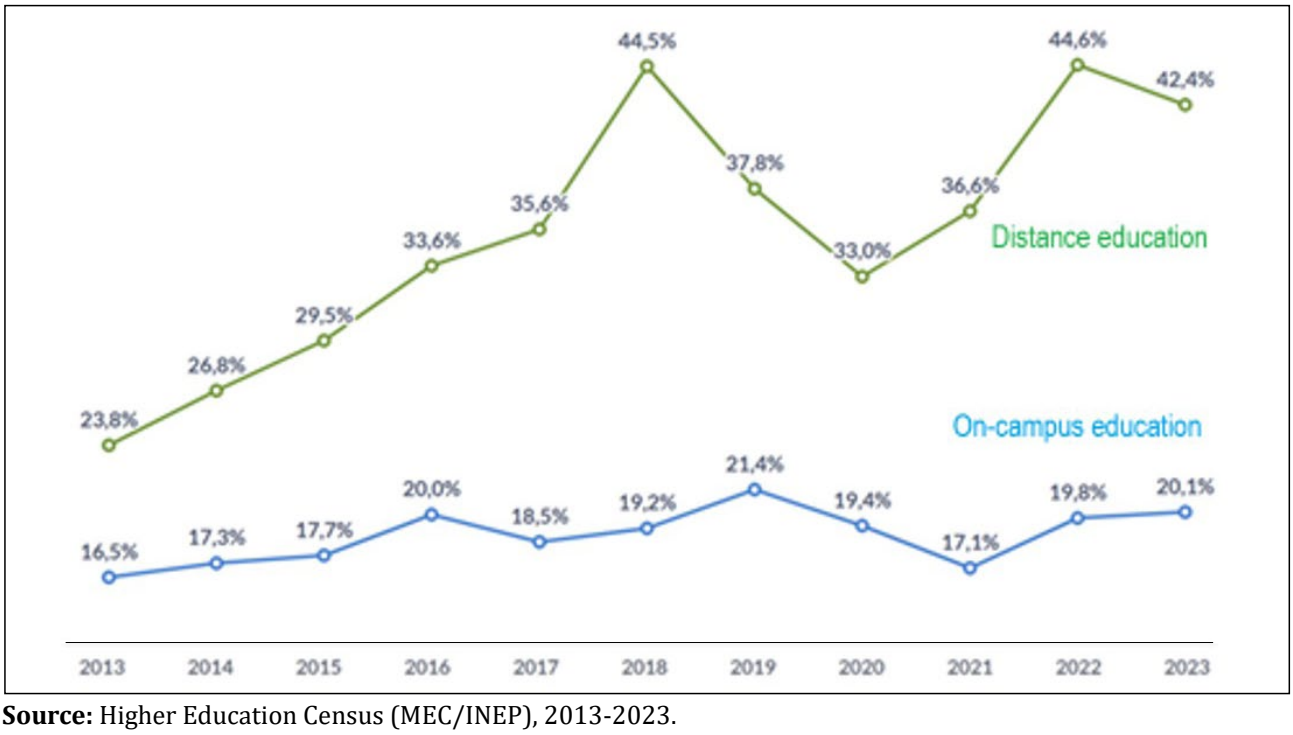
Figure 4 – Annual dropout and temporary withdrawal rates in Brazilian higher education



Source: Higher Education Census (MEC/INEP), 2013-2023.

dropout rates than on-campus programs, as evidenced in Figure 5 below. It is worth noting the trend of stability in the annual dropout rate for on-campus programs from 2014 onward, when higher education indicators became consolidated in the post-REUNI period[8]. There is also a noticeable spike in dropout rates in DE programs in 2018 (prior to the pandemic), which remained significantly high throughout the entire study period.

Figure 5 – Annual dropout rates for on-campus and distance education (DE) programs in Brazilian higher education



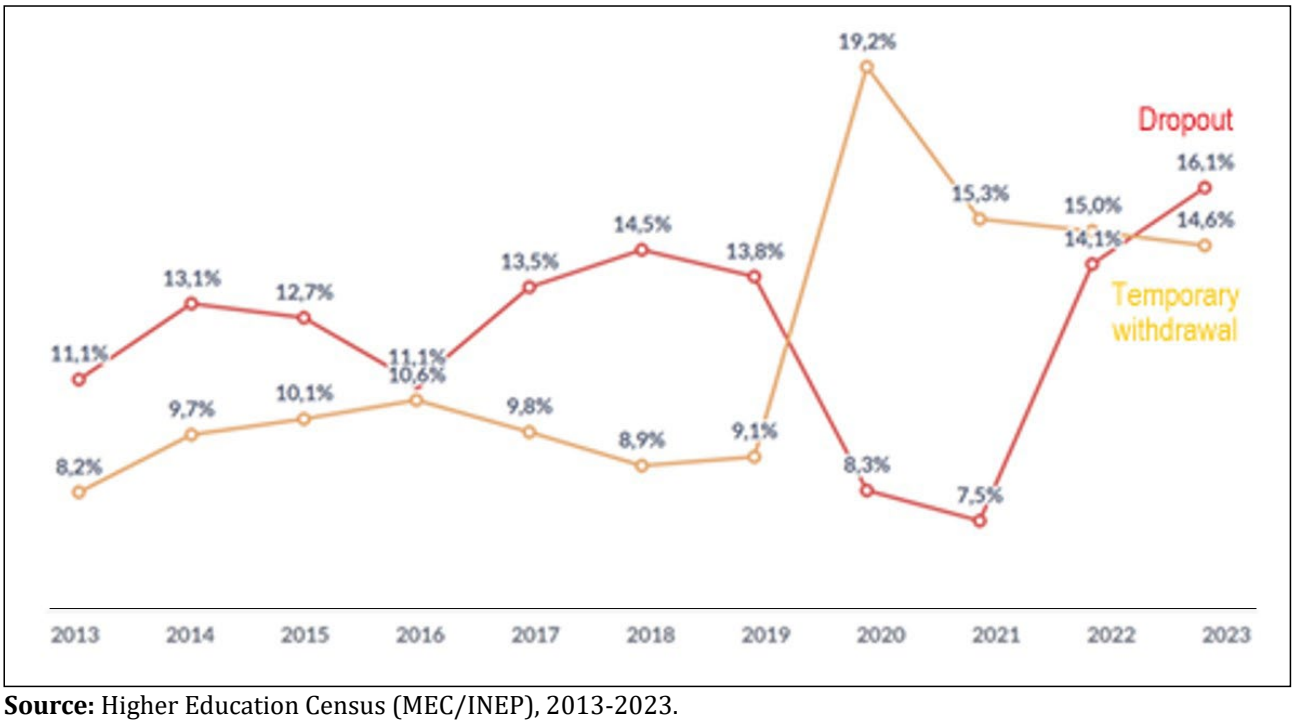
Source: Higher Education Census (MEC/INEP), 2013-2023.

8 The Support Program for Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (Reuni) was established by Decree No. 6,096, dated April 24, 2007.

When considering only the Federal Universities (Figure 6), a significant increase can be observed in the percentage of temporary withdrawals and a decrease in the dropout rate in 2020 and 2021. This occurred due to strategies adopted by the universities to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, such as making enrollment in course components optional and avoiding cancellations in institutional routines. In this regard, the annual dropout rate may not accurately represent the actual dropout behavior of students, indicating that the calculation method for this rate has its limitations and must be interpreted in conjunction with the temporary withdrawal rate to avoid premature conclusions.

Additionally, it is important to emphasize that any dropout indicator is conditioned by the formal records maintained by educational institutions. In many cases, student abandonment occurs before it is formally recorded in academic systems, resulting in a time lag between the actual dropout event and its official recording. This delay can compromise the accuracy of the indicators and hinder the timely identification of dropout patterns.

Figure 6 – Annual dropout and temporary withdrawal rates in federal universities



Source: Higher Education Census (MEC/INEP), 2013-2023.

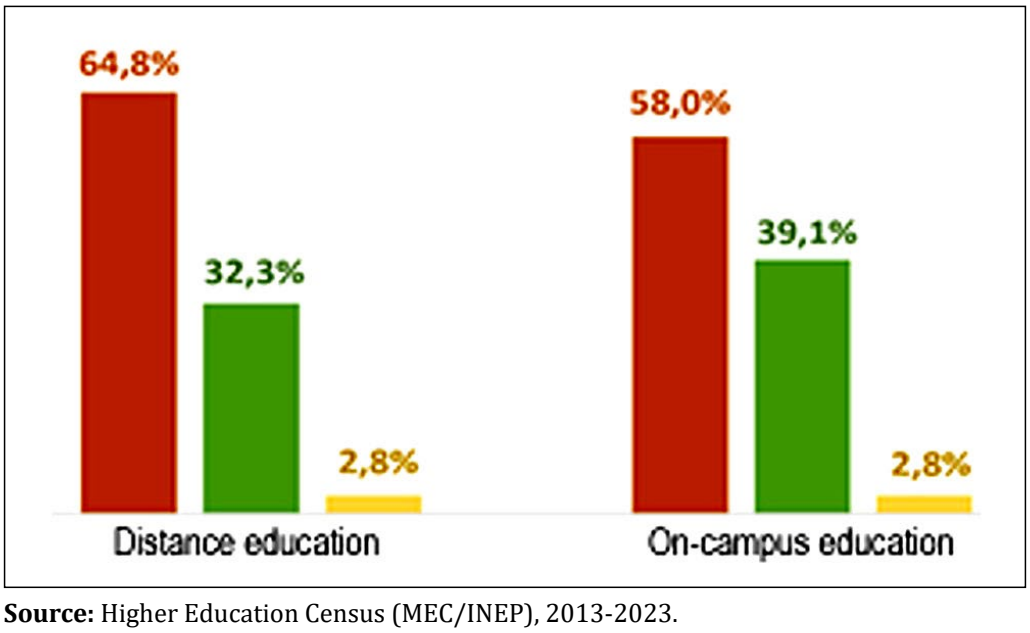
An alternative for calculating dropout, as previously discussed, is to use data from the higher education flow indicators, which consider the cohort of entrants from 2013 to 2019 and their respective academic status in 2023, based on the following indicators: Persistence Rate (PR), Cumulative Completion Rate (CCR), and Cumulative Dropout Rate (CDR).

We chose to adopt the term dropout instead of withdrawal, as used by INEP/MEC, since we understand dropout as a phenomenon with multiple causal factors—both internal (systemic) and external (student-related) to the institutions. It is not limited to the student's individual desire to withdraw, in which motivational and causal factors tend to be attributed solely to the student as a matter of "lack of will" to continue, disregarding institutional factors. In this regard, we highlight the contributions of key authors who address dropout from various causal perspectives, capturing the complexity of the phenomenon for a better understanding of the available data (Zago, 2006; Silva Filho *et al.*, 2007; Gisi, 2006; Baggi & Lopes, 2011; Kira, 1998; Braga, Peixoto & Bogutchi, 2003; Ronsoni, 2014; Zago, Pereira & Paixão, 2015).

We also opted to use the terms retention rate and graduation rate instead of persistence rate and completion rate, as originally defined by INEP, since we believe these provide greater conceptual precision and align more closely with the academic literature discussing student trajectories in higher education. The term retention refers more specifically to students who remain enrolled beyond the expected time for program completion, highlighting delays or extensions in the academic trajectory. The term graduation, in turn, explicitly refers to the formal completion of the academic process — the awarding of the diploma — which helps distinguish this outcome from other forms of partial completion. This terminological choice aims to enhance clarity in the analysis of academic trajectories and is aligned with the literature discussing student success and the factors associated with persistence and dropout in higher education (Coimbra, Silva & Costa, 2021).

For better understanding, it is possible to assess cumulative dropout, graduation, and retention rates at different levels of analysis. As shown in Figure 7, cumulative dropout rates are higher in distance education programs than in on-campus programs, while cumulative graduation rates are lower. Both dropout calculation models thus converge in showing that distance education programs present higher rates of academic abandonment, highlighting the need for further studies to evaluate possible influencing or correlational factors that could inform public policies and institutional actions aimed at minimizing—or even eliminating—their harmful effects on students' academic success.

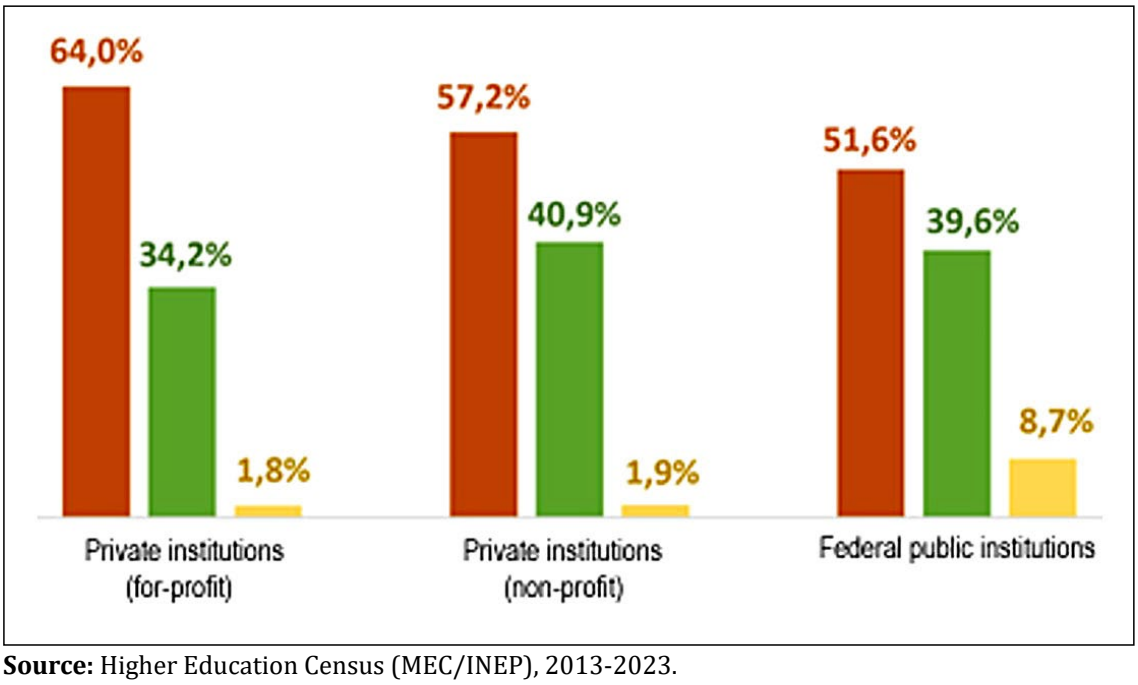
Figure 7 – Cumulative dropout, graduation, and retention rates, respectively, in on-campus and distance education (DE) programs



Source: Higher Education Census (MEC/INEP), 2013-2023.

When considering the administrative category of universities, cumulative dropout in federal public institutions is 51.6%, graduation is 39.6%, and retention is 8.7%. As shown in Figure 8 below, the dropout rate is lower compared to private institutions (both for-profit and non-profit), indicating better results for universities in terms of dropout when compared to private institutions. However, universities exhibit higher retention rates, as also observed in Figure 8.

Figure 8 – Cumulative dropout, graduation, and retention rates, respectively, in federal public institutions and in private institutions (for-profit and non-profit).



Source: Higher Education Census (MEC/INEP), 2013-2023.

Thus, a higher retention rate is observed in federal universities, possibly due to policies and routines regarding student dismissal, given that tuition-free education does not generate direct costs for students in comparison to maintaining enrollment without attendance in a private institution. In other words, the absence of tuition fees — while prolonged persistence causes losses for the system and, in the long term, for students — does not impose a financial burden on them, unlike what would occur in private institutions. The latter show higher dropout rates, especially for-profit institutions, where retention is almost nonexistent. This analysis requires closer examination of the curricular and structural characteristics of undergraduate programs in public and private HEIs to avoid superficial analyses or those poorly grounded in the actual conditions of these institutions.

It is also essential to highlight that both approaches used to calculate dropout rates operate at the program level. This means that the measured dropout does not necessarily represent departure from the higher education system as a whole, nor from the institution itself, but rather the student's disconnection from the specific program in which they initially enrolled. This methodological limitation tends to inflate dropout rates, as it includes cases of academic mobility—such as internal transfers between programs or institutions—that do not, in fact, constitute a definitive exit from the system.

In summary, based on the data presented and the analysis conducted, in light of the supporting theoretical framework, it is possible to identify several important indicators within the 10-year time frame (2013–2023):

» Increase in the annual dropout rate, likely as a consequence of the growth of the distance education (DE) modality, which shows higher dropout rates than on-campus programs. This calls for investigations into possible factors that may better describe the daily academic experiences and trajectories in on-campus, hybrid, and distance modalities, in order to map and intervene to minimize or even reverse these indicators.

» Stability of the annual dropout rate in on-campus programs and growth in DE programs from 2014 onward, when higher education indicators became

consolidated in the post-REUNI period. These data reinforce the coherence of using the annual dropout rate as a more stable indicator for analyzing the phenomenon, enabling more robust comparative studies to investigate its causes and/or determining factors.

» Significant increase in the percentage of temporary withdrawals and decrease in dropout rates in 2020 and 2021 in federal universities, due to the flexibility strategies adopted by federal HEIs (IFES) to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The data for the pandemic period highlight the need to contextualize these results, which diverge from the rest of the study period, as they had short-, medium-, and long-term implications that still require institutional strategies to address their distortions.

» The annual dropout rate warrants careful examination, especially during the pandemic period, and should be considered alongside the temporary withdrawal rate to avoid premature conclusions. As an alternative for monitoring dropout, academic trajectory data provided by INEP can be used, considering entrants from 2013 to 2019 and their respective academic statuses through 2023, which would bring greater stability to analyses and conclusions.

» Based on trajectory data, cumulative dropout rates are higher in DE programs than in on-campus programs, while cumulative graduation rates are lower, indicating that DE programs have higher academic abandonment and lower qualified persistence. These results are highly concerning given the expansion of DE in the country, pointing to its low graduation yield and significant waste of public investment in subsidizing a sector that contributes relatively little to professional and personal qualification in higher education.

» In federal public HEIs, academic trajectory indicators show a cumulative dropout rate of 47.9%, a graduation rate of 37.5%, and a retention rate of 14.5%. In private HEIs, with and without profit, dropout rates are significantly higher: 65.0% and 57.1%, respectively. Graduation rates are 32.4% for for-profit institutions and 38.9% for non-profit ones, while retention rates remain very low in both categories (2.58% and 3.98%, respectively). These results reveal a relatively stronger performance of federal public HEIs in terms of graduation and persistence, suggesting greater capacity to see students through to completion and, consequently, greater effectiveness in fulfilling their social role. Although dropout rates are also high in this segment, the figures observed in private institutions—especially for-profit ones, where dropout exceeds 60%—indicate an even more critical situation, with significant implications for the quality of education and equity in access to and persistence in higher education.

Conclusion

In summary, the data on dropout in Brazilian higher education during the period studied are highly concerning, particularly in the private sector, where the situation is further aggravated by figures from the distance education (DE) modality. Retention data are more significant in the public sector, which results in higher costs associated with prolonged persistence. This scenario requires studies aimed at identifying triggers that could alert management to take actions that minimize these situations and promote on-time, high-quality graduation.

Graduation indicators show that rates in both the public and private sectors do not reach 40% of those who enter higher education. This finding demands attention and the implementation of monitoring measures to ensure that

higher education systems fulfill their formative role within the expected time frame, enabling knowledge acquisition and the insertion of graduates into the labor market.

Based on the results analyzed and the theoretical framework discussed, this article aims to contribute to a theoretical and methodological reflection on research that uses more stable indicators, such as student trajectory data and cumulative dropout and retention rates, over longer time frames. Such an approach would help overcome intervening variables in these phenomena and allow for broader and more reliable analyses, given the multifaceted nature of the categories studied.

The examples and analyses presented throughout this article highlight the value of student trajectory indicators as tools for understanding patterns of persistence, dropout, and graduation in higher education. By demonstrating their interpretative potential across different institutional and temporal contexts, the study reinforces the idea that these indicators can serve as a basis for future research, contributing to the improvement of educational management policies and the development of more effective strategies to address dropout in the Brazilian university context.

In this regard, future work should include comparative studies between on-campus, hybrid, and distance modalities, broken down by field of knowledge, by public and private institutions, and by geographic region, to better address the elements highlighted above.

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Received in: 04/20/2025
Approved in: 07/14/2025