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Remote higher education and policies to confront the COVID-19 pandemic at the Federal University of Santa Maria

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This article aims to analyze the policies to face the COVID-19 pandemic, at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), especially with regard to the promotion of student assistance. At the beginning of 2020, with the significant increase in cases of COVID-19 in Brazil and in the world, a series of measures were implemented that affected all sectors, including the educational system. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), faced with this scenario, needed adaptations, with the development of emergency policies to assist students in situations of social vulnerability. Thus, the relevance of this study is justified as it seeks to demonstrate the challenges faced by UFSM, to guarantee students the right to education. **Objective:** Thus, this article aims to analyze the emerging issues in the policies to face the Covid-19 pandemic at UFSM, in addition to presenting the conceptions of the Dean of Student Affairs (PRAE) on the limits and potential of these policies in action. **Methodology:** For this purpose, a qualitative approach is used, with document analysis and an interview. **Results:** The results show that the scope of educational policies developed and implemented by the Dean of Student Affairs of UFSM and student assistance for the training of students play a fundamental role, ensuring that students have the means to achieve their academic goals and professionals, without damage to their integrity. **Conclusion :** On the other hand, the limitations imposed by the scrapping of HEIs, by frequent budget cuts, have compromised the continuity of student assistance actions and represent a threat to future UFSM students

KEYWORDS

Student assistance. Social vulnerability. Educational public policies. Covid-19.

Ensino superior remoto e as políticas de enfrentamento a pandemia de COVID-19 na Universidade Federal de Santa Maria

RESUMO

Introdução: Este artigo tem como escopo a análise das políticas de enfrentamento à pandemia do COVID-19, na Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM), especialmente no que se refere à promoção da assistência estudantil. No início de 2020, com o expressivo aumento de casos de COVID -19 no Brasil e no mundo, foram implantadas uma série de medidas que afetaram todos os setores, inclusive o sistema educacional. As Instituições de Ensino Superior (IES), diante desse cenário, necessitaram de

adaptações, com a elaboração de políticas emergenciais de assistência aos estudantes em situação de vulnerabilidade social. Deste modo, a relevância deste estudo justifica-se na medida em que procura demonstrar os desafios enfrentados pela UFSM, para garantir aos alunos o direito à educação. **Objetivo:** Assim, este artigo objetiva analisar as questões emergentes nas políticas de enfrentamento à pandemia do Covid-19 na UFSM, além de apresentar as concepções da Pró-Reitoria de Assuntos Estudantis (PRAE) sobre os limites e potencialidades dessas políticas em atuação. **Metodologia:** Para tanto, utiliza-se abordagem qualitativa, com análise documental e realização de entrevista. **Resultados:** Os resultados evidenciam que o alcance das políticas educacionais desenvolvidas e executadas pela Pró-Reitoria de Assuntos Estudantis da UFSM e a assistência estudantil para a formação dos estudantes exercem papel fundamental, garantindo que os estudantes tenham meios de alcançar os seus objetivos acadêmicos e profissionais, sem danos à sua integridade. **Conclusão:** Em contrapartida, as limitações impostas pelo sucateamento das IES, pelos frequentes cortes orçamentários, têm comprometido a continuidade das ações de assistência estudantil e representam uma ameaça aos futuros estudantes da UFSM.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Assistência estudantil. Vulnerabilidade social. Políticas públicas educacionais. Covid-19.

Educación superior a distancia y políticas para enfrentar la pandemia del COVID-19 en la Universidad Federal de Santa María

RESUMEN

Introducción: Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las políticas para enfrentar la pandemia de COVID-19, en la Universidad Federal de Santa María (UFSM), especialmente en lo que se refiere a la promoción de la asistencia estudiantil. A principios de 2020, con el aumento significativo de casos de COVID-19 en Brasil y en el mundo, se implementaron una serie de medidas que afectaron a todos los sectores, incluido el sistema educativo. Las Instituciones de Educación Superior, ante este escenario, necesitaron adaptaciones, con el desarrollo de políticas de emergencia para atender a los estudiantes en situación de vulnerabilidad social. Por lo tanto, la relevancia de este estudio se justifica en la medida en que busca demostrar los desafíos que enfrenta la UFSM para garantizar a los estudiantes el derecho a la educación. **Objetivo:** Así, este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las cuestiones emergentes en las políticas de enfrentamiento a la pandemia de la Covid-19. **Metodología:** Para tal fin, se utiliza un enfoque cualitativo, con análisis de documentos y entrevistas. **Resultados:** Los resultados muestran que el alcance de las políticas educativas desarrolladas e implementadas por el Decano de Asuntos Estudiantiles de la UFSM y la asistencia a los estudiantes para la formación de los estudiantes juegan un papel fundamental, asegurando que los estudiantes tengan los medios para alcanzar sus metas académicas y profesionales, sin perjuicio de su integridad. **Conclusión:** Por otro lado, las limitaciones impuestas por la liquidación de las IES, por los frecuentes recortes presupuestarios, comprometieron la continuidad de las acciones de asistencia a los estudiantes y representan una amenaza para los futuros estudiantes de la UFSM.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Asistencia a los estudiantes. Vulnerabilidad social. Políticas públicas educativas. Covid-19.

CRediT

- **Recognitions:** The Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) and Pró-Reitoria de Assuntos Estudantis (PRAE) of UFSM.
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Introduction

In the year 2020, the world was surprised by the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which generates both asymptomatic infections and severe respiratory crisis. This situation of force majeure extends until the present moment, the middle of the year 2021, and requires a series of restrictive measures in order to prevent the contagion and dissemination of the virus. One of the main prevention measures imposed is the social/physical distancing, thus, the face-to-face classes in basic and higher education throughout the country were suspended indefinitely (BRASIL, 2020).

This misfortune that plagues the world (and more expressively (the) countries with governments not very committed to overcome the health crisis), generated the need for students to have some means of learning, in the midst of this unprecedented pandemic, which led educational institutions to resort to remote learning. The forms of remote teaching adopted varied among the different regions of Brazil, spheres, education networks and schooling levels. In the midst of synchronous and asynchronous classes,¹ online or hybrid, it is expressed the attempt to maintain the educational link, seeking to ensure access and permanence to students (ARRUDA, 2020).

The abrupt changes, arising from the need to maintain physical distance, led educational institutions to a series of adaptations. With the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) it was no different, the changes go through teaching, with the preparation of emergency curricula, for example, to administrative issues, with emergency assistance policies. At the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), Ordinance 97.935/2020 of March 16, 2020, decided, among other provisions, to suspend face-to-face classroom academic and administrative activities for a period of 30 days, starting on March 17, 2020. Thus, the academic semester that had just started was greatly affected. Later, on April 7th, 2020, in an extraordinary meeting of the Teaching, Research and Extension Council (TREC), it was defined that the classes would start on May 18th, 2020, under the Special Home Exercise Regime (SHER)², a regime regulated by Resolution N. 024/20.

It should be noted that, due to successive extensions of Ordinance 97.935/2020, academic and administrative activities have remained suspended until the present moment. However, on February 26th, 2021, the above-mentioned Ordinance was revoked by Normative Ordinance 019/2021, which regulates the suspension of on-site academic and administrative activities, maintaining only the services considered essential, such as surveillance,

¹ Synchronous classes occur in real time, with simultaneous teacher-student interaction, for example: classes on Meet. Whereas in asynchronous lessons there is no real-time involvement, e.g. recorded lessons that can be followed at any time or place.

² Regulates the Special Home Exercise Regime (SHER) and other related provisions, during the Suspension of In-Person Academic Activities in view of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

maintenance, and health. This Normative Ordinance was in force for one month, starting on March 1st, 2021, and was extended successively, and the ordinance currently in force is Normative Ordinance No. 027/2021, of July 28th, 2021. In accordance with the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO), the necessary measures were taken to ensure the physical integrity of the academic community.

Before the pandemic, attendance was the reality of about 94.6% of students (approximately 28,746 thousand) at UFSM, compared to the remaining 5.3% (approximately 1,624 thousand) of students who have taken courses in the Distance Learning modality (EAD) (UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA MARIA, 2021). However, it should be noted that DL is not remote learning adopted on an emergency basis, the only parallel established here, as it refers to face-to-face teaching. Since DL is a planned teaching modality, with specialized tutors, technological teaching resources and students who have opted for this form of teaching (have the means to participate), i.e., the opposite of the unexpected situation experienced with the pandemic, which led to the implementation of the NET (COQUEIRO; SOUSA, 2021).

Now, it is undeniable that all sectors of society were severely affected by the pandemic of COVID-19. With the educational system it was no different, and it needed adaptations to mitigate the effects and negative impacts of this dark period for humanity.

In this aspect, we highlight the educational public policies that were fundamental to guarantee many students the constitutional right to education. Thus, the relevance of this study is justified as far as it seeks to demonstrate the challenges that HEIs face in order to guarantee students full access to online education. Furthermore, it seeks to analyze the policies for confronting the pandemic at UFSM, aimed at students in situations of social vulnerability.

The policies under analysis refer to the means of enabling student permanence in the face of the adverse situation faced. To do so, they focus on ensuring subsidies for the payment of internet access plans, besides the acquisition of equipment to attend classes and the payment of extraordinary food allowance to meet basic needs. Given the above, this writing aims to analyze the emerging issues in the policies to confront the Covid-19 pandemic at UFSM, as well as to present the conceptions of the Pro-Rector of Student Affairs (PRSA), about the limits and potentialities of these policies in action.

This article is systematized in the following parts in order to meet the outlined objective: -Introduction; -Methodological course; -Student Assistance and the Perspectives for Permanence at the Federal University of Santa Maria in the Midst of the Pandemic; -Actions and Policies to Confront the Pandemic at UFSM: Perspectives of Student Assistance; -The Budgetary Impact for the Subsistence of the University and its Means of Assistance; -The Roles Developed by Student Assistance and Final Considerations.

Methodological path

This study in Education has a qualitative approach, with documentary analysis and interviews (GIL, 2002; LÜDKE; ANDRÉ, 2013). Through document analysis, it becomes possible to verify the discourse adopted in the emergency edicts, in addition to elucidating the policies regarding the pandemic, promoted by the UFSM. Thus, the intentions of the political text and the main actors involved in its construction are looked at. Meanwhile, by means of a semi-structured interview, it is possible to give voice to a representative of the PRAE, who will be cited throughout the text as (E, 2021). The interview gives the article an exploratory character and not only a descriptive character of what welfare policies propose, allowing us to glimpse some aspects of the policy in action, and, consequently, some possible effects.

It should be emphasized that the interviewee's speech will be altered, not in its content or construction, but in order to make it more intelligible to the reader. Thus, vices, idioms, and expressions typical and exclusive of oral language will be brought - when possible, that is, when they do not interfere with the message that the interviewee wants to transmit - to a writing more suitable for reading in the official language standard. From the interview with the representative who worked on the policies to fight the pandemic in the researched institution, it becomes possible to understand the team's conceptions, as well as the limitations and potentialities of the policies in face of the adverse situation (pandemic), never before faced by the institution.

As a method of analysis, both the policy documents that support the study and the data obtained from the interview were submitted to Bardin's Content Analysis (2011), a methodology based on three main steps, namely: pre-analysis, material exploration and treatment of results. It is understood that the Content Analysis allows the understanding about the relationships built in the study, especially between the established speech and the external factors, reflecting the essence of the phenomenon studied (BARDIN, 2011).

In this analysis process, an important step is the data coding, in which units (keywords) are selected from the text clippings, which are classified and aggregated, highlighting the categories produced from the data.

The categories need a generic title that defines all the elements grouped in it. Thus, it is understood that the formation of categories allows the condensation and simplified representation of the raw data (BARDIN, 2011). From this process, four categories of analysis were produced, namely: **I**) Public welfare policies; **II**) Emergency measures; **III**) Budget cuts and **IV**) Challenges of student assistance, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Student assistance and the prospects for permanence at the Federal University of Santa Maria in the midst of a pandemic

This section is dedicated to the approach of the category entitled: **Public policies for assistance**, which briefly discusses the educational scenario in the face of the pandemic and highlights some referrals made from public policies for student assistance.

In early 2020, with the rampant increase in the number of cases of Covid-19 in Brazil and worldwide, the Ministry of Health issued guidelines and alerts, based on the recognition by the World Health Organization (WHO) of the high degree of transmission and risk of death.

In Santa Maria, the first measures were implemented from the Executive Decree No. 53, of March 16, 2020, which was prepared in line with the State Decree No. 55,115, of March 12, 2020, and the latest guidelines of the health agencies.

The measures imposed refer to the need to expand preventive measures, especially with regard to social isolation, the reduction of crowding and circulation of people in public spaces, the adoption of basic hygiene habits, and the expansion of cleaning routines in common circulation areas (SANTA MARIA, 2020; RIO GRANDE DO SUL, 2020).

Public policies are essential to guarantee fundamental rights, so educational policies are the core of a liberating education. According to Rodrigues (2010, p. 52-53), public policies: "disposes about "what to do" (actions), "where to get to" (goals or objectives related to the state of things that one intends to change) and "how to do" (action strategies)". In the first instance, it is worth thinking about policies not only for access, but also for permanence in educational spaces.

Public education policies can be defined as programs and actions aimed at guaranteeing access to education for all, considering that the Federal Constitution (1988) itself states that every citizen must have guaranteed access to education (BRASIL, 1988). In this way, the State has the duty to provide quality education to the subjects, using for these public policies consistent with the social reality and with the rights that must be guaranteed to citizens.

In this sense, it is noteworthy that:

If "public policy" is everything that a government does or fails to do, educational public policy is everything that a government does or fails to do in education. But education is too broad a concept to deal with educational policies. This means that education policy is a more specific focus of the treatment of education, which generally applies to school issues. In other words, one can say that educational public policies concern school education (OLIVEIRA, 2010, p.4).

Educational public policies guide and structure the educational system in a comprehensive, multidimensional, and contextualized way (MAINARDES, 2018). From this perspective, it is important that educational policies are aligned with the demands of the school context, which is multifactorial in itself. This alignment is necessary from the genesis of the policy to its various effects. Moreover, as Dourado (2007, p. 15) points out "the creation of conditions, dimensions and factors for the provision of a social quality education also comes up against a reality marked by socioeconomic cultural inequality, which is sometimes disregarded in the development of public policies.

A reality that generates inequalities of opportunities in the most different means of social action, but that can be minimized through welfare policies that equip beings from different social, economic, racial, and regional realities, among others. Thus, the need for educational policies to face the students' socio-economic-cultural problems is reiterated, in order to guarantee favorable conditions for learning (FARAGE; COSTA; SILVA, 2021). This complex reality, constituted by economic, social, and cultural inequalities, defined as social issue, is a result of the capital x labor contradictions, understood as the set of political, social, and economic problems that emerge with the emergence of the working class and that was imposed in the world in the course of the constitution of the capitalist society (CERQUEIRA FILHO, 1982).

A recent survey by the National Association of Directors of Federal Institutions of Higher Education (ANDIFES) showed that the profile of undergraduate students is increasingly reflecting the Brazilian reality. The diversity of the population, in terms of race, sexuality, culture, and income, has shown itself in the university academic environment. The survey showed that the number of quota holders rose from 3.1% in 2005 to 48.3% in 2018. In the income question, in 1996, 44.3% of the student body had a monthly per capita family income of one and a half minimum wages, in 2018, the percentage represents 70.2% (ANDIFES, 2019). These results reveal the decisive importance that student assistance policies have in allowing the permanence of low-income students in a space marked, in Brazilian history, by belonging to elitist classes (LIMA, 2021).

In the last two decades, Brazilian education has undergone numerous changes, and one of the main and most important transformations refers to the expansion of education, especially Higher Education (HE). In parallel to the access policies to higher education, it has become necessary to develop permanence policies in these educational spaces for socially vulnerable students. In this context, the Student Assistance Policies (PAE) play a preponderant role to enable the permanence of these students in the HEIs, supplying from the basic needs, such as food, housing, and health, to those that emerge as a result of academic life, such as transportation, didactic material, culture, sports, daycare, among others.

Despite several advances, such as the promulgation of the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education - LDBEN (Law no. 9.394/96); the approval of the National Education Plan (Law no. 13.005/2014); the creation of the University for All Program (Law no. 11.096/2005) and the Institution of the Support Program for Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (Decree No. 6.096/2007), it is remarkable how precarious and segregated the Brazilian education system, especially higher education, is in the neoliberal context in which it is inserted.

In view of this, Mészáros proposes a reflection on the importance of overcoming the logic of capital in the structuring of public educational policies. However, he alerts us that education alone "is not able to transform society towards social emancipation, but it presents itself as a possibility to contribute to the planning of strategies to break with the control exercised by capital" (MÉSZÁROS, 2008, p. 35).

In this sense, it is pointed out that the UFSM is a national and international reference in terms of public policies of assistance to socially vulnerable students. The policies developed and in operation continue to contemplate an increasingly significant number of students, who through these affirmative actions and the democratization of access to education, successfully completed their education (UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA MARIA, 2019).

Aligned to this perspective that Decree No. 7.234, of July 19, 2010, provides about the National Program of Student Assistance - PNAES (BRASIL 2010). PNAES is executed under the Ministry of Education and aims to expand the conditions for young people to remain in federal public higher education.

The objectives of PNAES, according to its art. 2, are

- I - Democratizing the conditions for young people to remain in federal public higher education;
- II - Minimize the effects of social and regional inequalities in the permanence and conclusion of higher education;
- III - Reducing retention and evasion rates; and
- IV - Contribute to the promotion of social inclusion through education (BRASIL, 2010).

In accordance with Article 3, the PNAES should be implemented in an articulated manner, with the activities of teaching, research, and extension, aiming to serve students regularly enrolled in undergraduate courses at federal institutions of higher education.

§ 1º The student assistance actions of the PNAES should be developed in the following areas: I - Student housing; II - Food; III - Transportation; IV - Health care;

V - Digital inclusion; VI - Culture; VII - Sports; VIII - Daycare; IX - Pedagogical support; and X - Access, participation and learning of students with disabilities, global development disorders and high abilities and overdose. § Paragraph 2 - The federal institution of higher education will be responsible for defining the criteria and methodology for selecting the undergraduate students to be benefited (BRASIL, 2010).

Like all Federal Universities, student assistance at UFSM is implemented through the PNAES. In this sense, it offers several student assistance policies. One of them is the Socioeconomic Benefit - BSE, which provides students with per capita family income below one and a half minimum wages with a set of assistance actions, such as housing, food, and transportation. UFSM also offers training scholarships to students, in addition to transportation aid, acquisition of pedagogical material, Student Assistance Scholarships (SAS) and scholarships from the Housing Aid Program (HAP).

Pandemic confrontation actions and policies at UFSM: perspectives from student assistance

This section is intended for discussion of the category entitled: Emergency Measures, in which it is possible to follow the report on the emerging needs and the forms of assistance developed by PRAE. In view of what has been exposed so far, it is possible to notice the commitment of UFSM with PRAE to guarantee the permanence of students at the university, seeking to support them in their needs. The strategies used demonstrate an attempt to minimize the damage to students, especially those in situations of social vulnerability. These and other impressions are revealed from the interview with the professional who works on the front line of Student Assistance, who richly reports the paths taken, the limitations, the advances, and other relevant points of the pandemic scenario, never experienced before.

With the pandemic, followed by the demands of the WHO, the demands of the students and, consequently, of the management became different. Any action taken by the institution should be based on the aforementioned means of prevention against Covid-19. Thus, the suspension of academic and administrative activities at the UFSM campuses occurred through the publication of the UFSM Ordinance No. 97.935, March 16, 2020, and the Municipal Executive Decree No. 54, March 18, 2020 (BRASIL, 2020; SANTA MARIA, 2020). From then on, the students' reality changed considerably, making it necessary and urgent to build subsistence policies, either through scholarships and/or aid.

However, in March 2020, students from different regions of the country and the world had just returned to the student house for the beginning of the school semester, which made the process of emptying the housing conflictive. However, the emergency policies followed the WHO guidelines and had the full support and involvement of the department of public health,

to avoid a catastrophe within the institution (E, 2021), in view of the imminent risk to the health of students, to remain on the premises of the University Student House (CEU), which has shared spaces, making the social distance unfeasible.

In view of this, on March 19, 2020, through a PRAE Service Order, it was granted to students living in the CEU the exceptional transportation allowance, for the purpose of compensation in cash for the amounts spent by the student to return to his city of residence, in order to evacuate the place, as reported by the technician interviewed:

Our luck was that we had a health team and the collective health department (working) remarkably close to avoid a catastrophe inside the institution, in the student housing [...] because what happens, we have the largest student house in Latin America, in Santa Maria, so you can imagine, we have 2,300 residents from all states, not counting immigrants from other countries. So, if we stayed with these people here or if everyone returned at that time, we would have an epicenter of COVID in Brazil [...] thanks to this partnership of the department of collective health of the CCS (Center for Health Sciences) we managed to structure very well this health issue in student housing (E, 2021).

Due to this demand, the exceptional transportation assistance came in handy, but it could not meet all the students, and about 200 refused to leave the CEU, even knowing the high risks of transmission of Covid-19. According to the interviewee's experience with the conditions faced by the students, she/he understands that many of the residents:

From the student's home [...] they already come in a situation of vulnerability because they practically break their family ties, you know. Many of them have relationship problems, other problems at home, family violence, and they come here with the intention of disconnecting from all this, of escaping from it all, as an escape. And these then, they stayed, there were about 200 students (E, 2021).

Although the surveillance has directed the PRAE to empty the house, this was not possible and, therefore, it became necessary for these students to take responsibility for their decision to remain in the CEU, and for this, they: signed a term of responsibility, where they were made aware of the gravity, of the danger that is to remain in the student's house at this time by the housing situation (E, 2021).

Besides the normative that regulates the permanence of students in the CEU, a normative was also elaborated, by instruction of the health surveillance, to curb the return of those who had already left, so that: visits, overnights, and returns of those who have not stayed since March of last year, are prohibited. They cannot return without authorization until the situation is normalized (E, 2021).

The interviewee's report highlights that, in the first instance, it was believed that the extraordinary transportation aid was the necessary, however, as observed, many students did

not have the means (for several personal reasons) to return to their respective residences, even with the financial support. Thus, due to the suspension of the activities of the University Restaurant (RU), for an indefinite period of time, and the permanence of a portion of students in the student housing, PRAE launched the Announcement 014/2020, regarding the Extraordinary Food Aid, in the monthly amount of R\$ 250.00, which in mid-August 2021 became R\$ 350.00 per student.

In this period, seeking to maintain the link with the institution, the teaching followed the NET, a modality that requires internet access and technological equipment, which not all students have. Thus, on June 17th, 2020, the Announcement # 027/2020 - Digital Inclusion Aid was launched, aimed at the acquisition of an internet plan or mobile data package, for students regularly enrolled in any level of education (undergraduate, graduate, high school/technical and face-to-face technology), who follow didactic/pedagogical activities through REDE.

This aid is intended for students with the Socio-Economic Benefit (BSE) active and not provisional, in the UFSM, in order to provide the achievement of academic performance and the permanence of the student, during the time of the remote activities. According to the PRAE representative, a survey of the internet plan prices in the region was conducted, so that the amount destined to each student could be determined. After the mapping, the value to be granted to each student contemplated with the edict was set at R\$60.00 per month.

In addition to the cost of the internet plan, on September 17th, 2020, the Edict # 041/2020 - Digital Inclusion Aid - Equipment acquisition was published.

This announcement has similar selection criteria, seeking to favor socially vulnerable students, therefore, only those regularly enrolled at UFSM, who follow didactic/pedagogical activities in NET and with active BSE and not provisional. It also meets the requirements of the digital inclusion guidelines of the PNAES, specifically the regulations of Resolutions 035/2013 and 024/2020.

The Digital Inclusion Aid - Acquisition of Equipment is intended exclusively for the purchase of computers or tablets, which must contribute to digital inclusion and the performance of remote academic activities. Recently, on July 15th, 2021, a new edition of the Digital Inclusion Aid - Acquisition of Equipment was launched, through Announcement 028/2021, for the first semester of 2021. Both edicts allocate the amount of R\$1,000.00 to the selected students.

When questioned about the inclusion, the access of students to these edicts, the technician explains that the food allowance is automatically intended for students who stayed in the house, so

Today we only include in the food allowance the student who is authorized to return home, because now the practical classes are returning, students with final internship, these students make a process via PEN (National Electronic Process), justifying, requesting this return and then they have the authorization or not, the approval or not, if it is approved, we automatically include them in the food allowance. So, to access food allowance, this is how it is done, because it is forbidden to return to the student's home (E, 2021).

On the other hand, the aid for Digital Inclusion, both for the acquisition of internet packages and equipment, at first had a small demand, but with the new edition, for the first semester of 2021, the demand increased significantly. The demand has taken such a proportion that, unfortunately, the interviewee points out that the institution will not:

To be able to contemplate all the students who requested it, because we had a limited resource for this, it won't be able to contemplate all of them. So, I believe that the difficulty of access doesn't really exist. It could have happened last year, but this year I think that the fact that there was such a big demand, **was not a matter of access**, but a matter of not knowing, or not having information, or not being interested at all (E, 2021, our emphasis).

Thus, one can note the actions transposed into policies developed by UFSM, for the care of students in social vulnerability, in the face of new demands in pandemic period. Moreover, it is observed that policies do not have ends in themselves, they are put into practice to modify/minimize situations and, therefore, are influenced by different means.

The result of a policy transcends its genesis and purpose, it is interrelated with historical-social issues, which can be limiting in ensuring the right provided by the Federal Constitution (CF/1988), of education for all citizens (BRAZIL, 1988; BALL; MAINARDES, 2011).

The budgetary impact on the university's livelihood and means of support

This section of the article exposes through the category entitled: **Budget Cuts**, how the PRAE has allocated limited resources to students. It is noteworthy that the context in which emergency policies were developed is related, to a great extent, to the social-political context. Therefore, it is important to present the evidence of the historical moment that the policies discussed here permeate. The struggle for the maintenance of the UFSM, as well as other public HEIs, is not recent, however, in recent years, the onslaughts of dismantling have intensified, especially through budget cuts (FERRARI, 2019). These constant cuts made by the Federal Government have affected student assistance quite severely:

These cuts have affected us a lot, especially in terms of housing, what happens is that we were able to build four more blocks of houses and today what happens is that we

don't have a vacancy for all the demand that comes to us. So, if we had kept up the pace we had been going until the previous government, it would be possible, if it were in our interest, to build at least one more block of houses. But at this moment it is not possible, **we won't be able to cope with all the demand we have**, the pent-up demand from last year[...]. We have a 2020 waiting list. Probably what will happen? We will be able to assist the most vulnerable, that's how we will need to do it, **to verify who has greater vulnerability to be able to receive them in the housing** (E, 2021, our emphasis).

This impasse, which leaves no choice but to serve the most vulnerable students, among those who are already considered vulnerable, highlights the deep structural crisis of the global capital system that demands and imposes cuts on an ever-increasing scale, a crisis that even signals the need to destroy [...] all welfare state" (MÉSZÁROS, 2002, p.916). Before the pandemic, even with constant threats of cuts, the UFSM continued to ensure that students with active BSE were entitled to several grants, in addition to scholarship opportunities, as the interviewee points out:

The students receive free food, the student with BSE [...] the student who is not from Santa Maria and needs housing, he has housing [...] they can also access the work scholarships [...] they have the right to transportation aid, to pedagogical material aid, the mothers who live in the student's house and do not wish to live in the house with the children, they have the right to a PAM (Programa Auxílio à Moradia - Housing Aid Program) scholarship to help with the cost of the rent. [...] those mothers who cannot find a place in the daycare, in the municipality's early childhood education network, we pay the daycare assistance. [...] we also have the orchestra scholarship for the people who play in the orchestra, there is the monitoring scholarship and the PRAXIS scholarship from PRE (Pró-Reitoria de Extensão) (E, 2021).

However, with the pandemic, the demands have become other, as mentioned earlier, so that the impacts of the pandemic are felt in society as a whole, highlighting and accentuating the already existing social crisis, with high rates of unemployment and poverty. Thus, the HEI's role becomes even more important, considering the governmental neglect in promoting assistance policies for low-income citizens.

Many people lost their jobs, right, we know that it was a huge economic crisis, we did not suspend the payment of scholarships, we even maintained it, right, all thanks to the closing of the RU, because then the money that we would spend with the RU, we managed to redistribute by making the payment of these grants in another way for students. [...] we kept the PAM scholarship for all mothers, regardless of whether they have vacancies in day care centers or not, we ended up paying for all of them from there, as an aid (E, 2021, our emphasis).

In the national context, the Federal Government, under pressure, implemented the Emergency Aid for low-income families, in the initial value of R\$ 600.00 per person, who fit the requirements, but recently it was reduced to R\$ 300.00 per family. This is a derisory amount, given the high inflation (8.99% accumulation of IPCA in the last 12 months) and the low purchasing power in Brazil (IBGE, 2021). This way, we corroborate the

interviewee when he points out that the edicts were fundamental: "due to the economic crisis itself that the country was going through, many students were counting on their own food aid to help their families at home, many people were without the emergency aid, so this was very important for them" (E, 2021).

Considering that the economic changes hit low-income citizens very hard, the role of these aids is acknowledged and there is concern about the scarcity of resources allocated to the institution by the Federal Government. The interviewee points out that they are:

Yes, we are facing a problem, in the transfer of funds from the government because we still have a contingency amount, an incredibly significant amount, **if the government does not release this resource, we will not be able to keep the aid until the end of the year or until the situation is normalized.** If we had the university restaurant working, right, as it used to, I don't know if we would be able to keep it open (E, 2021, our emphasis)

The maintenance of the assistance is often put in check, but the PRAE team tries to devise ways to divide the existing resources in a fair way, even in the face of resource limitations. Thus, when asked if the amounts allocated in each public notice for students were consistent with the social reality experienced, the interviewee explains that

We first launched the R\$250,00 (food allowance), so if we were to do an analysis, this is for one student, it is for one person, a student who stays at the student's home. If we compare this value with the value of the emergency aid that the government made available for the families, which later became R\$ 300,00, it is a fair value. Even the value of the family allowance offered by CAPES and CRAS is a hundred and a few reais for the whole family, so, in this sense, it is a fair value. What happens with the crisis, prices have inflated, everything has gone up, so now, in August, we are going to change the value to R\$350,00. Why is this? A gas is R\$100,00, everything has gone up [...] so we had this need to increase the food allowance. We consider the internet support to be enough. Because the CPD itself did a survey of the value of the plans, of what would be necessary for the students to contract a plan that would allow them to participate in the NET classes. So, there is nothing to talk about, it is adequate, yes (E, 2021).

From the considerations made by the technician, one can see the parallel established between public policies at the macro - national level versus the micro - local level to face the pandemic. This bias goes beyond the scope of this research, but serves as a subsidy for future studies, which aim to reflect on the real reach of these assistance policies.

The roles developed by student assistance

The present section is intended for discussion of the category of analysis, named: Challenges of student assistance, in which some of the adversities faced by the PRAE team for the development of their functions during the pandemic are exposed. It is understood that

student assistance is essential within an Education policy, and even more important in times of pandemic. Student assistance is of fundamental importance as it enables students in a situation of socioeconomic vulnerability to have access to and remain in their course and, subsequently, to finish their studies.

With the restructuring and expansion of the Higher Education Institutions, the profile of the students has changed and, thus, it has become necessary to develop public and assistance policies that serve this group of students in order to minimize their difficulties, helping to reduce the repetition and evasion in Higher Education. This section dedicates space to highlight the responsibility that fell on PRAE, during the pandemic, every strategic action required a very quick and precise decision making. In this sense, the interviewee highlights the challenges faced by the team that worked on the front line of Student Assistance at UFSM:

First of all, the team that remained working in person was an extremely small team. It was me and 3 other servers, so we were in 4 people to account every day in person for the problems that arose. Secondly, I think that the lack of information that we remained in face-to-face service. What we discovered and realized in this pandemic? **that student assistance is not considered an essential activity, but it plays this role**, so it was difficult for us to order from the storeroom, they did not deliver to us, they only delivered to the University Hospital, [...] we were not considered an essential service (E, 2021, our emphasis).

In addition to the lack of recognition that part of the team continued to work in person, these employees played roles that went beyond the administrative functions of student assistance. The interviewee reports that the team played a family role and got involved in students' mental health issues. Therefore, the employee states that: it was a job **that left us extremely worn out, tired, frustrated**, we felt a lot of wear and tear, especially physical and mental, of having to face all of this in this way (E, 2021, our emphasis).

Despite recognizing the weariness of the overload, it is understood that this period of pandemic is also configured as a learning moment: *I think we ended up improving, improving our way of acting when facing urgencies and emergencies, quick decision making, in this sense, we learned a lot* (E, 2021). In addition, the team's satisfaction in knowing that many students, even in the face of the adverse situation that assails the world, managed to complete their training is also noteworthy:

The biggest gain is knowing that in our University, despite the whole pandemic situation, **many people managed to finish the course, managed to graduate, thanks to the help, to the work that we developed during this period**. We saw many people graduate, we are still following these graduations, people graduating, this is the biggest gain, for sure. I think that this is the reason why student assistance exists, so that the student can finish his course, and then get a job in the job market, in graduate studies, in the sector where he is interested. The biggest gain was certainly this (E, 2021, our emphasis).

Given the notorious effort of the assistance in guaranteeing the students' physical and mental integrity, another relevant point is highlighted, which concerns the presence of the mothers in the student's home, especially during this pandemic period, which required extreme care. There was even involvement:

[...] of the guardianship council during the pandemic in the house, who questioned why the children would be in the house, if the student's house is a place that represents so much risk. So, our team also needed to think of new strategies so that this would not become a problem for the mothers or cause some major upset, some major issue involving the guardianship council itself and the courts. [...] We had mothers with children in the house and several children, not several, but I think at least 3 children who were born during the pandemic in the house as well, newborn babies, so these are things that people do not even imagine that happen or that have happened (E, 2021).

We can observe, therefore, some of the evidence that reinforces the important role developed by PRAE, in face of the most diverse impasses experienced by students. New strategies have been developed, not only successfully performing the routine tasks of student assistance, but also elevating them, through friendly and helpful actions, so necessary in nebulous moments.

Final considerations

From what has been said so far, it can be said that the text addresses the educational public policies aimed at students in situations of vulnerability within the UFSM, and, for this, it discusses student assistance, with respect to the measures adopted from the context of the pandemic of COVID-19, in order to overcome the problems faced from the scenario, aiming at a safe education and without harm to students. Thus, the central objective of this research is resumed, which is to analyze the issues emerging in the policies for coping with the Covid-19 pandemic at UFSM, besides presenting the conceptions of the Pro-Rector of Student Affairs (PRAE) about the limits and potentialities of these policies in action.

Thus, it is understood the influence around these policies, which allow glimpsing the paths followed by PRAE and UFSM as a whole, from the recognition of the demands of students facing the pandemic. Moreover, the context of the production of the text is explored, through the presentation of the discussions of strategies and of some actors involved in the decision-making that legitimize the discourses for the writing of the emergency policies in question (student assistance edicts). The context of the practice of these policies, although still in progress, can be identified with the participation of students by REDE, by the support of students who remained at CEU, and by the graduations of students in vulnerable situations, which occurred in the middle of the pandemic.

Therefore, we can see the reach of these policies and the role of student assistance for the education of students, both through the guarantee of food, housing, and health, which contribute to the achievement of their academic goals, without damage to their physical and/or mental integrity. However, it is noteworthy that this study is not exhausted in the present research, but that the development of new research in this area is desired, with the intention of also investigating the conceptions of the academic community, especially the students, regarding student assistance. We reiterate the urgency and the emergency that the resources destined for public universities be reestablished, ensuring access to free and quality knowledge, a right of all citizens.

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