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Affirmative Action for Black, Indigenous and Quilombola Students at a Brazilian University

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Abstract: Multiculturalism and cultural diversity permeate various sectors of society, including higher education. The educational policies implemented in this sphere appear to promote social and educational equality. The aim of this study was to examine this subject by analysing the affirmative action policy implemented in a Brazilian university. It sought to understand whether this policy has contributed to the access and completion of undergraduate programmes of black and mixed-race, indigenous and quilombola students. The analysis was conducted based on data relating to the access and dropout of students who enrolled in the university through the quota and reservation systems. Data were collected from university administrative datasets and a questionnaire administered to undergraduate course coordinators and students who had benefited from the policy in question and dropped out of university. The findings reveal, on the one hand, an increase in the intake of black and mixed-race, indigenous and quilombola students. On the other hand, a high dropout rate was observed among these students, which may raise the possibility that the policy in question is not completely successful.

Keywords: affirmative policies; dropout; higher education; multiculturalism

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1. Introduction

The term multiculturalism deserves a critical analysis, according to Touraine [1] (p. 230), if carried to an extreme and takes the form of "absolute differentialism". Multiculturalism is part of postmodernism, and its development is largely due to globalization [2].

Skliar [3] states that there has been widespread overuse of this term. It is a polysemic concept, used from different perspectives and for different purposes [4]. Inglis [4] distinguishes three meanings of multiculturalism. The demographic-descriptive refers to the existence of different ethnicities or races in the population that makes up a society and a state (this understanding is very close to that provided by Bolaffi [5]); the programmatic-political refers to specific policies and measures that aim to respond to cultural diversity; and the ideological-normative emphasizes the guarantee of the right of this cultural diversity to exist and to unconditional access and participation in the constitutional principles and general values of society [4].

Brazil, the country that this article is about, is a multicultural country with significant cultural diversity. There is a simultaneous and interactive existence of several cultures in its space and time, and it is a country where the multicultural issue has existed and been discussed for a long time. This does not mean that this multiculturalism is synonymous with cultural inclusion; in fact, we argue that there is no true inclusive multiculturalism in Brazil. For this to occur, the three meanings of multiculturalism explained by Inglis [4] must be a reality.

Concretely, from our perspective, it is not sufficient to note the simultaneous and interactive existence of several cultures in a given space and time (demographic multiculturalism), nor to have specific policies and measures that aim to respond to diversity cultural (programmatic-political multiculturalism). This existence and interaction must translate into equality of rights and duties of different cultures (ideological-normative multiculturalism). It is, we reinforce, the combination of these three meanings that makes true inclusive multiculturalism possible.

Based on data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) [6], ethnic-racial inequalities have historical origins and are persistent, leading the black population to suffer "severe disadvantages" in relation to the white population in several indicators, such as income distribution, the labour market, violence, political representation, housing conditions and education. Brazil's economic cycles over 300 years were based on slave labour. Formally, freedom for black people dates back 135 years. Throughout its history, economic development has built up a social structure revealed by data from different surveys, which demonstrate social disparities and point to chronic racial inequality in Brazil. The inequality in the country is structural and systemic, which means that a set of institutional, social, and individual practices create the misconception that the marginalization of black people, the indigenous and the quilambolas and the privileges of white people are considered to be normal.

The IBGE [6] considers that there are indicators of transformation, but also states that the social gap is still very significant and has historical roots. The data and reports produced by surveys in the country reveal that the idea of alleged equality does not exist, and that the black population in Brazil remains, in general, in a significantly lower social condition than the white population. This can be understood in a technical note published in 2013 by the Institute for Applied Economic Research:

> Part of the white elite shies away from realising the racism that is still very prevalent in the country and, above all, the racism that kills. According to our calculations, more than 39,000 black people are murdered every year in Brazil, compared to 16,000 people of all other "races". In addition to physical extinction, there are thousands of symbolic deaths behind the loss of opportunities and personal growth that many individuals suffer simply because of their skin colour. These are lives lost in the face of racism in Brazil. [7]

As Munanga [8] (p. 89) points out, what exists is a myth of racial democracy, based on:

> the double biological and cultural mestizaje between the three original races, [which] has a very deep penetration in Brazilian society: it exalts the idea of harmonious coexistence between individuals from all social stratifications and ethnic groups, allowing the dominant elites to conceal inequalities and preventing members of non-white communities from being aware of the subtle mechanisms of exclusion of which they are victims in society. In other words, it covers up racial conflicts, enabling everyone to recognise themselves as Brazilians and preventing subaltern communities from becoming aware of their cultural characteristics that would have contributed to the construction and expression of their own identity. These characteristics are "expropriated", "dominated" and converted into national symbols by the dominant elites.

In fact, as Fernandes et al. [9] have emphasized, Brazil remains far from being considered a racial democracy. The white population rank higher than the black and mixed-race population in socioeconomic terms.

According to these authors, there is no collective identity that promotes equality and social justice; what has existed is a demographic multiculturalism [4,5], which means that there are several cultures in the same time-space, dominated by white culture. It is in this context of inequality that affirmative action policies have emerged in an attempt to blur these differences and contribute to promoting equality, social justice and democracy. According to Gomes [10] (p. 222), affirmative action can be understood as:

> a set of public or private policies, actions, and guidelines, of a compulsory, optional or voluntary nature, which aim to amend the inequalities imposed on certain social and/or ethnic-racial groups that have a recognised history of discrimination and exclusion. They have an emergency and transitional nature. Their continuity will depend on ongoing evaluation and proven change in the discriminatory framework that caused them.

Affirmative action policies have a very long tradition in countries such as the USA, Australia, Canada, India, Malaysia, South Africa, Northern Ireland and other European countries [11,12]. According to Moehlecke [11], in Brazil, debates about affirmative action can be traced to 1968. In the mid-1990s, the first quota law emerged, guaranteeing a minimum 30% quota of women to stand as candidates for all political parties, and it was only "from 2001 onwards that affirmative action policies for the black population were approved by decision of the public authorities" [11] (p. 209). Fernandes et al. [9] highlight the creation of Law No. 12.288/2010, which established the Statute of Racial Equality, as one of the main achievements of the black movement towards equal opportunities and rights, and against discrimination.

As far as higher education is concerned, affirmative action policies also seek to combat existing inequalities in the societies where they are implemented, particularly regarding access for groups historically excluded from this subsystem of education. They appear as a form of multiculturalism and seek to promote cultural diversity.

There are several examples of these kinds of policies, some of which warrant a critical reflection due to the less favourable impacts they may have, despite their validity in terms of promoting equal opportunities. One of these policies created an alternative university subsystem in Mexico in 2003, and is explicitly aimed at indigenous students. This created the so-called intercultural universities (so-called because they not only have indigenous students, but also rural students and others from the geographical area where these universities are located) as a new type of higher education institution [13]. Similar examples exist in other Latin American countries. This could be seen as an innovative response from the state to the demands made by indigenous people regarding the scope and relevance of higher education for their communities. However, this type of university can pose some difficulties for students when it comes to dealing with society beyond their communities. It is the question of the global validity of the knowledge acquired that is at stake: in fact, many of the students at these universities find it very difficult to integrate into the labour market, which does not recognize their knowledge [13].

Regarding affirmative action policies and actions in higher education, Ahmed [14] states that without real institutional change, it is difficult to have effectively diverse and inclusive contexts. Further, as Nada and Araújo [15] point out, when addressing the issue in higher education, institutions often do not change their organizational forms or ways of thinking, acting, and feeling, in other words, their culture [16] and the different cultures they encounter are perceived from the perspective of a deficit. However, this way of implementing affirmative policies does not promote true multiculturalism. In the case of Brazil, the inequality of some groups regarding education in general and higher education in particular is a structural phenomenon. Queiroz [17] (p. 361) asserts:

> The first studies carried out, on access of racial segments to public university, reported the reduced presence of black students in that space, highlighting the fact that the black students who were there were pursuing careers which were not highly valued. The most prestigious careers were hotly contested in the entrance exam and were a privilege for white students, those who had received their basic education in public schools and under more favourable conditions.

Jesus [18] (p. 114) reports that 'Placing the Brazilian academic system in international perspective, we conclude that our picture of racial exclusion in higher education is one of the most extreme in the world'. Barbosa [19] reinforces this situation by emphasising

the continuing existence of huge social and racial injustices regarding the access to and continued presence of students in Brazilian higher education.

Considering these inequalities, specific affirmative action policies have been created, which several authors understand as a way of promoting racial equality in education [20,21]. Among them is Law No. 12.711/2012 [22], which regulates the entry to federal universities and federal secondary technical education institutions. This law sets aside places for self-declared black, mixed-race, and indigenous people and for people with disabilities in higher education institutions, Federal Institutes of Technological Education and Federal Technological Education Centres. Decree 7.824/12 [23], which regulates Law 12.711/2012 [22], establishes 50% of public university places reserved for students from public schools, with an equal proportion for black, mixed-race, and indigenous students.

This and other affirmative action policies relating to higher education have triggered a large degree of debate and resistance. According to Santos [24], resistance to quotas has been based on three main arguments. The first argument concerns the denial of individual meritocracy and a consequent loss in the quality of education; the second alleges that the country lacks well-defined racial boundaries, thereby making it difficult to affirm who is black; and finally, there is the argument that the regulation of quotas recognizes the existence of discrimination.

Regardless, these policies have generally ensured increased access for groups that have traditionally been excluded from higher education [21,25–28]. Nevertheless, several authors point out the inadequacy of these policies. Some have warned of the continuing under-representation of black people in higher education in general [19,29] and the predominance of white people in more highly valued programmes such as engineering [30], while others have drawn attention to the continuing undervaluation of non-white cultures and knowledge [19], and still others point out that Brazilian higher education has not reacted satisfactorily to the demand from indigenous peoples [31].

We believe, however, that the study of the effectiveness of these policies should not be limited to access; when analysing multiculturalism and the promotion of equal opportunities provided by the quota policies, the dimension of the success/failure of these students should also be considered. In our research, we approach the issue from the perspective of what we believe is the greatest indicator of failure: dropout. Rosemberg [32] (p. 19) refers to what affirmative action must consider:

> Strategies for admission to higher education of discriminated social and ethnic-racial segments are one way [...] The perspective of affirmative action in education is not just to widen the access of black, indigenous, and public-school graduates to educational levels, but also their permanence and success.

Barbosa [19] also argues that the analysis of such policies ought to take into account entering, staying in and feeling part of public universities.

Our research therefore seeks to explore the existence of multiculturalism in higher education through an analysis of affirmative action for black and mixed-race, indigenous and quilombola[1] students who have entered university through the quota and reservation system. The research carried out is essentially based on the meanings of multiculturalism by Inglis [4], as previously outlined: the demographic-descriptive, programmatic-political, and ideological-normative meanings.

This research was conducted at a university in Bahia, Brazil, and its main objective was to analyse the affirmative action policy of the university under study based on the access and dropout rates of black and mixed-race, indigenous and quilombola students, between 2007 and 2017. The research question for this study is as follows:

To what extent does the affirmative action policy of the university under study guarantee access and the continued presence of black and mixed-race, indigenous and quilombola students with quotas and reserved places?

We believe that the research carried out is pertinent, above all because, while modest, it aims to help reduce a gap that is not exclusive to the context studied: the lack of monitoring of policies in order to understand whether and how the expected objectives are being

achieved [33]. In fact, trying to understand whether affirmative action at the university under study has been successful seems relevant to us because, despite the fact that the policy of quotas and reservation was implemented more than a decade ago, no study, whether produced by researchers or by the state, until this research, has consistently analysed this policy in order to find out whether it is in fact effective [21].

In the following sections, we will analyse in detail how the research was designed and conducted, along with the main findings.

2. Materials and Methods

This research was carried out at a university in Bahia, Brazil. It was a case study [34]. It took a different path from that initially planned, as it coincided with the period of restrictive measures regarding COVID-19. We will report on the deviations that occurred in the research.

The data collection carried out between 2019 and 2021, taking place in three distinct phases. Initially (between mid-2019 and January 2020), we collected secondary administrative data from the university under study, searching for documents directly related to the affirmative action policy (quotas and reservation places) over the first ten years of the policy's implementation: 2007 to 2017. Then (January 2021), we requested quantitative data from the Undergraduate and Academic Affairs Pro Rectory on students who had entered via the quota and reservation system and those who had completed/dropped out of their courses during the same period. The third stage consisted of applying a questionnaire with closed and open questions, using Google Forms, to the students who dropped out and to the course coordinators (in the case of coordinators in January 2021 and in the case of students in March 2021).

As can be seen, the collection of empirical data was interrupted for a long period. This was caused by the beginning of the confinement measures in Brazil, which began in February/March 2020. During this period, part of the initial research plan was redefined; the secondary administrative data resulting from the first phase of the fieldwork were analysed; the questionnaire initially designed was changed to include open questions; and the literature review work was deepened.

The questionnaire was not identical for the two types of participants—some specific questions were posed to each group, although both were organized into three dimensions: personal characteristics data; perceptions of the dropout of quota students and of the university's reservation of places; and perceptions of the university's affirmative action policy. The choice of these dimensions helps to answer the question and main objective of the research, explained in the introduction to this article.

In the third phase, in addition to the surveys, we had planned to carry out interviews with the aforementioned students and with the coordinators of each degree course and, subsequently, a focus group with the students, but the COVID-19 pandemic prevented both the interviews and the focus group from being realized, given that the social isolation required by the pandemic scenario made it impossible to proceed with this aspect.

In addition to this issue, some factors resulted in the poor participation of the students selected in the study and a delay in data collection. The students who dropped out of school felt frustrated by the fact that they had not graduated, which made many of them unwilling to take part when the research topic was explained. In addition, many of the contact details provided by the Academic Affairs Department were outdated, inaccurate or incomplete. In fact, gathering data and accessing students was a considerable challenge.

At the beginning of January 2021, the data on dropout between 2007 and 2017 were requested for black and mixed-race, non-black, indigenous and quilombola students who entered the university through the quota and reservation system. A total of 3518 students were contacted by e-mail and telephone number. At the beginning of March 2021, an email was sent to all quota students who dropped out between 2007 and 2017 with a link to the Google Forms questionnaire, asking them to fill it in. As mentioned, many of the emails were no longer being used and had been incorrectly registered in the system, preventing

most students from replying. As a result, we resorted to a different approach, contact via telephone, although the results were equally disappointing, as many students no longer used the telephone number provided. Some contacts were made via WhatsApp.

Therefore, only 19 students who had entered through the quota and reservation system and who had dropped out of the undergraduate programme took part in the study, with representation from each category of student: black, non-black, indigenous and quilombola. This can be seen as a limitation of the study, as the number of participants was effectively low. However, we were able to obtain a rich set of qualitative data from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, which allowed us to understand the students' perspective on our research question, in particular on the reasons for school dropout.

The coordinators were selected due to the closeness they have to the students on the different courses. In addition, they were permanent teachers. The questionnaire was sent to all the coordinators of the different courses available, because the question of dropout affected all courses. Of the 29 coordinators, 18 took part in the survey.

The questionnaire's open questions were processed, based on content analysis, using MAXQDA 2020 software, and the closed questions were worked on using SPSS 21, which allowed a descriptive statistical analysis to be performed. It is important to emphasize that the statistical analysis performed throughout the survey was very simple, basically consisting of organizing the data into relative and absolute frequencies. This option was taken considering the total number of respondents.

The research adopted ethical principles based on Resolution 466 of the National Health Council [35], which deals with research with human beings. Resolution 510 establishes that, during the research, participants must be guaranteed privacy, anonymity and, above all, no harm of any kind [36].

All the participants were informed about the nature of the research, as well as its subject and objectives. Initially, this was undertaken either via email or by telephone. In these initial contacts, participants were also informed about the ethical principles that the research would follow, which was reinforced when they formalized their participation in the study.

Their willingness to participate in the study (both coordinators and students) was formalized by signing a Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), signed in two copies, and sent by e-mail, which will be kept in a safe place for a period of five years. The FICF provided clarifications about the research, as well as information, in accessible and practical language for all participants, guaranteeing respect for their privacy. In addition, the FICF clarified the participant's freedom to withdraw or refuse to take part in the research at any stage.

3. Results

This section presents a discussion of the study's results, divided into two parts: the places offered; their occupancy by black and mixed-race, non-black, indigenous and quilombola vacancy/quota reservation students and the dropout rate of these students; and the respondents' perceptions of the university's affirmative action policy and the dropout rate of the students under analysis. The results of the first section examine secondary data (administrative data provided by the university).

Although the focus of our research is on analysing the effectiveness of affirmative action at this university, whenever possible, we compared the data from students in the reservation/quota system with those of students in the general admission system.

3.1. Analysis of Administrative Data on Vacancies, Enrolment, and Dropout Rates of Quota Students

The university under study adopted affirmative action policies before Decree 7.824/12, which regulates Law 12.711/2012, was introduced. In 2004, the University Council assigned a committee to develop an affirmative action policy proposal for the university. In 2006, the council decided to adopt the system of reserving places at the university, approving Reso-

lution 034/06 on 20 July 2006. From the first semester of 2007, the university guaranteed 50% of its places on all courses for students from public schools and, of these, 80% for black and mixed-race students and 20% for non-black from public schools, as well as two extra places per course for indigenous people and quilombolas. Therefore, this higher education institution has been using equivalent criteria to Law 12.711 since 2007.

According to data presented in the university's Affirmative Action Policy Report, produced in 2018, a total number of 21,890 places were offered to students from the general admission system and to quota students who had opted for the reservation system (black and mixed-race people, non-black people from public schools, quilombolas and indigenous people) between 2007 and 2017. The data in the report only disaggregate information according to race for those students who applied via the quota system. This fact hinders a more in-depth analysis of the racial dimension, since there are, for instance, black and mixed-race students among both types of students: reserved/quota places and in the general admission system.

Adding up the applications from all the categories of students who opted for the system of reserved places (black and mixed-race students, non-black students from public schools, quilombolas and indigenous people), it is noted that their number is very close to the number of those who applied through the general admission system. Out of 226,049 students registered to apply, 112,766 chose the reserved place option, i.e., 49.9%. Of these, 92,560 represent the black and mixed-race category, 16,612 non-black students, 2361 indigenous and 1233 quilombolas.

The remaining 113,283 students, i.e., 50.1%, were candidates who applied through the general admission system. The difference between those who applied through the general admission system and those who selected the reservation system was very small, at 0.2%. This information is shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Applicants by student category between 2007 and 2017.

Student Category	Number of Applicants
General admission system	113,283 (50.1%)
Reserved places: - Black and mixed-race - Non-black - Indigenous - Quilombolas	 92,560 16,612 2361 1233 Subtotal: 112,766 (49.9%)
Total number of candidates	226,049

Authors' calculations. Source: Affirmative Action Policy Report (2018).

Among the candidates who opted for racial and social quotas, there is a clear predominance of applications from black and mixed-race students from public schools, accounting for 82% of all quota holders. These figures ultimately reflect the university's system for reserving places, although it is not possible to compare how many black and mixed-race, indigenous and quilombola students are enrolled at the university through general admission.

From all those who applied, 16,248 students were selected and 16,158 were enrolled. Of these, 9229 were students from the reserved system (57%) and 6929 (43%) were students from the general admission system (Table 2).

Similarly, there is a clear predominance of black and mixed-race people among quota students. Overall, students in the quota who graduated represent a low proportion (21.4%) of those enrolled. It is students from the quilombolas and indigenous categories who have the lowest percentage of graduates in relation to the total number of students registered from their respective groups: 3.9% and 12%, respectively (Table 3).

Table 2. Students enrolled by category between 2007 and 2017.

Student Category	Number of Students Enrolled
General admission system	6929 (43%)
Reserved places: - Black and mixed-race - Non-black - Indigenous - Quilombolas	 7280 1610 184 155 Subtotal: 9229 (57%)
Total students enrolled	16,158

Authors' calculations. Source: Affirmative Action Policy Report (2018).

Table 3. Graduated students per reserved/quota student enrolled between 2007 and 2017.

Enrolled Students	Graduated Students
- Black and mixed-race: 7280 - Non-black: 1610 - Indigenous: 184 - Quilombolas: 155	- Black and mixed-race: 1608 (22.1%) - Non-black: 342 (21.2%) - Indigenous: 22 (12.0%) - Quilombolas: 6 (3.9%)
Total: 9229	Total: 1978 (21.4%)

Authors' calculations. Source: Affirmative Action Policy Report (2018).

The dropout rate among students who entered the university through the quota and reservation system is very high (38.1%, i.e., 3518 students). Of the total number of students registered, a significant percentage remain at the institution (40.5%, i.e., 3733 students), without having completed the course. Table 4 provides a snapshot of these students.

Table 4. General picture of reserved and quota students between 2007 and 2017.

Students	Number of Students
Enrolled	9229
Graduated	1978
Dropped out	3518
Linked to the university	3733

Authors' calculations. Source: Affirmative Action Policy Report (2018).

The data from the report show that the situation of students enrolled through the general admission system have similar characteristics. Of the 6929 students enrolled, 2200 dropped out (31.8%), 1621 completed their courses (23.4%), and 3108 were still at the university (44.8%). Thus, the problem of dropout affects students in general, although this problem is slightly more pronounced among those in the quota system. As the data on students from the general admission system is not broken down, we are unable to accurately compare the relative proportions of students enrolled through the general admission process, although we know that among them, there are at least some black and mixed-race students, non-black students from public schools, and students with economic and social difficulties.

In any case, we would like to stress that the focus of our research was to analyse the effectiveness of affirmative action, which is why the analysis was centred on students in the quota system.

The data provided from the Undergraduate and Academic Affairs Pro Rectory of the university under study in 2021 allow a more thorough understanding of the dropout problem of students who entered through the quota and reservation system, considering variables such as gender, colour/race/ethnicity, the school period of the dropout and its evolution over time.

Male students had a slightly higher proportion of dropout (51%) than female students (49%). These results are in line with those published nationwide in the Higher Education

Map [37], which states that the number of students who drop out is slightly higher among men, as well as other studies [38].

When we look more closely at the numbers in relation to the colour/race/ethnicity of the students who drop out, we see that the vast majority (79%) are black, which means that 8 out of every 10 students who drop out are black. This is followed by students considered non-black (18%), *quilombolas* (2%) and indigenous (1%). These figures reflect the representativeness of each of these groups at the university, i.e., black students are in the majority, while *quilombolas* and indigenous people are the minority categories among enrolled students. If we cross-reference gender with the colour/race/ethnicity of the students, we obtain data along the same lines, as we would expect (Figure 1).

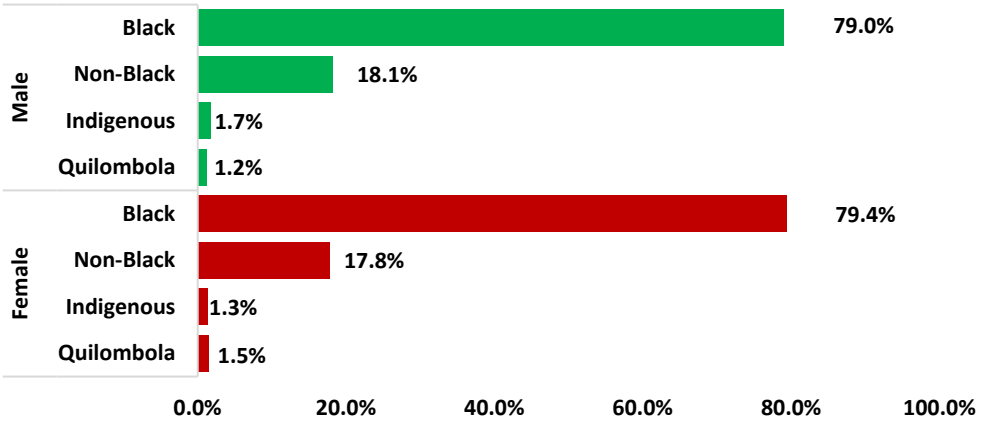

Figure 1. Dropout by gender and colour/race/ethnicity. Authors' calculations. Source: Undergraduate and Academic Affairs Pro Rectory, 2021.

Extending the analysis beyond the data collected for our case study, we found that black students suffer from this problem across the board. According to the 2019 Higher Education Census [39], black students have a higher risk of dropout than white students. In 2018, according to data from the IBGE [6], the proportion of white 18-to-24-year-old students who attended or had already completed higher education was almost twice as high (36.1%) as among black students—black or mixed-race (18.3%). A study on affirmative action and the black population in higher education, published in August 2020 by the Institute for Applied Economic Research [40], states that 36% of young whites in that age group were studying or had completed their degree, while among black and mixed-race people, that percentage is halved to 18%.

But it is not just black people who have difficulties remaining in Brazilian higher education. As Loss and Rosa [41] (p. 169) point out, despite the advances in access to this level of education, "we still have a lot to build on to guarantee the permanence of Afro-descendants, indigenous people, farmers, among others, in the academic space". Other disadvantaged students in other countries live in similar situations. For example, indigenous Māori and Pasifika students in New Zealand face problems of success [42].

It appears that universities in general, and Brazilian universities in particular, are not designed to come to terms with challenges faced by black and mixed-race, indigenous, *quilombolas*, poor, peripheral, transgender, and disabled populations. This can be seen, in addition to what has already been mentioned, by a low presence of black and indigenous professors, an almost total absence of these theorists in the syllabus and even, as Backes [43] and Davis, Melo and Malheiro [44] state, a lack of debate on racial and ethnic issues in many university contexts. In this regard, Carvalho [12] (pp. 92;144) argues that:

> universities have been white institutional spaces. They have expanded their contingent of students and professors' countless times throughout the 20th century, but they have not taken any initiative to correct the racial exclusion that has char-

> acterized them since their foundation [with an] almost blind eurocentrism that is perpetuated in our environment without being subjected to the slightest criticism.

In Brazil, a law dated 2014 reserves 20% of places for black people in public tenders—Law 12.990/2014 [45]. Santos et al. [46] studied and analysed the implementation of the law in federal universities and concluded that the recruitment of black teachers in the 54 universities that took part in the study (86% of all federal universities) is far from fulfilling the law. Fernandes et al. [9] came to the same kind of conclusion when they studied the two federal higher education institutions in Espírito Santo: the institutions surveyed do not apply the reservation of vacancies for black people as required by law. This situation occurs in other latitudes. Discriminatory practices restricting the recruitment of lecturers of colour have also taken place in the United States [47]. Smith and Wolfgramm-Foliaki [42] report that indigenous lecturers, Māori and Pasifika, are grossly under-represented in New Zealand higher education.

Universities' unsatisfactory response to indigenous communities does not only occur in Brazil, as mentioned [31]. It happens, for example, in Australia [48] and in New Zealand [49], where they continue to be under-represented. Bhopal [47] reports that students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds continue to be under-represented in elite universities in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The continuity of a monoculture, the overvaluing of white culture, and the near absence of discussion of ethnic and racial issues in the university space, which we have also mentioned, are further examples of resistance to affirmative action policies. In fact, despite the creation of compulsory subjects in undergraduate courses (such as education and ethnic–racial relations) as an essential strategy in higher education to promote racial equality, the homogenization of whiteness in teacher training in Brazil remains [50]. A further example of the homogeneity of higher education training is in Chile, where the population attending higher education, although characterized by a high composition of indigenous and non-indigenous students, receives a single, homogeneous, Eurocentric professional training that does not take the existing social and cultural diversity into account [51]. This naturally creates cultural clashes that hinder the success and continued studies of students who are more distant from the dominant culture that predominates in higher education.

Further examples highlight the many difficulties faced by quota students at university. Many students have a low economic level, which means that many of them need to work at the same time, which causes them difficulties in their studies [52]. In fact, the economic and social vulnerability and lack access to student assistance policies has been identified as one of the main causes of dropout of these students [53,54].

This situation leads us towards what Bourdieu [55] calls camouflaged subtle forms of exclusion. In other words, the state guarantees an apparent equality of opportunity, based on access to education, but does not guarantee equal opportunities to stay. In fact, quota students suffer a culture shock when they enter university [56]. As Lin [57] points out, there are various chameleon-like manifestations of social exclusion in higher education. The author argues that these manifestations are often hidden behind the specific vocabulary of the subfield/area of knowledge, or the technical language used.

Regarding the school term in which the dropout occurs, the data provided by the Undergraduate and Academic Affairs Pro Rectory, 2021, at the university we studied revealed that the vast majority occur between the first and third periods (82%): 40% in the first, 28% in the second and 14% in the third period. These data are in line with the national trend, where around 50% of dropouts in higher education take place in the first semester [58].

The data collected also suggest that the dropout rate increased roughly linearly over the period studied, with the highest number of dropouts occurring between 2014 and 2015, with a total of 674 quota students. In Brazil, according to the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research [58], the general dropout rate in higher education remained constant between 2007 and 2017, at around 21%. This is a high rate, but still well

below that seen among students who enrolled in higher education through the quota and reservation system at the university under study, which, as already mentioned, was 38.1%.

Although of a limited number, it is important to give voice to the two main stakeholders in our research, the course coordinators and the students who entered the university through the quota and reservation system and then dropped out. Consequently, we carried out a survey, as mentioned in the methodology section, in an attempt to ascertain their perceptions of the university's affirmative action policy and the problem of dropout, particularly with regard to their thoughts on its causes.

3.2. Perceptions of Quota Student Dropout and the University's Affirmative Action Policy

Of the 3518 students who dropped out, only 19 responded to the survey. Of these, there were 13 black, 2 indigenous, 2 *quilombola* and 2 non-black students. This is a limitation of our study, to which we have already referred.

Regarding the course coordinators, of the 29 in total, we obtained feedback from 18. In relation to the length of service at the university, two were there for between 1 and 5 years, seven for between 6 and 11 years, four for between 12 and 16 years, and five for 17 years or more. As for their role as course coordinators, 16 answered that they had worked for between 1 and 5 years, 1 answered that he had been in the role for between 6 and 11 years, and one replied he had worked for 17 years or more.

Firstly, we asked whether the coordinators and students were aware of the general data on dropout produced by the university (contained in the report evaluating ten years of affirmative action). We verified that the coordinators were almost completely unaware of the subject, with 15 (83%) of the 18 responding that they did not know anything about this information, while the students were totally unaware. The students also replied that they had no access to the data, so they were completely unaware of it in relation to their degree course. A similar situation occurred among the coordinators, as 16 of them (89%) said they did not have any data on dropout in the course they coordinated by student category. A significant number of coordinators (15; 83%) stated that they were unaware of whether dropout rates were higher or lower among black and mixed-race, non-black, indigenous and *quilombola* students than those who entered the courses through the general admission system. These results are concerning. On the one hand, they reflect a lack of communication between those who produce the data and those who should be interested in them and, on the other, that any action that needs to be adopted will not be taken on a solid basis. This lack of knowledge may also be indicative of a certain devaluation of the issue of dropout by the coordinators.

Our next step was to try to ascertain the respondents' perceptions of the causes of dropout among students who enter the institution through the quota and reserved system. Our approach to achieving this goal was to present the participants with a list of potential causes (joined another course; difficulty keeping up with the course; did not identify with the course; job/work; lack of encouragement from teachers; lack of institutional support; illness/mental health; lack of motivation; lack of adaptation to the institution; financial difficulties) and ask them to indicate the impact they considered each factor to have on student dropout: none, low, medium or high. Respondents could also indicate other causes that they considered relevant that were not listed.

All the coordinators (18) thought that financial difficulties had a high impact on these students' dropout. This was immediately followed by employment/work-related causes (12 coordinators, 66%), difficulties in keeping up with the course (10 coordinators, 56%), lack of student motivation (10 coordinators, 56%) and lack of adaptation to the institution (10 coordinators, 56%). At the opposite end of the spectrum, i.e., the causes considered by the majority of coordinators to have little or no impact on dropout, are those which may in some way jeopardize teachers and the institution: entering another course was considered to have little impact by 13 coordinators (72%), the lack of encouragement from teachers to students was seen as having little or no impact by 11 coordinators (61%), and the lack of institutional support was also considered to have little or no impact by 12 coordinators (66%).

In relation to the 19 students' perception of the causes of dropout, it was possible to see some similarities in the distribution of their responses. As with the coordinators, for the students, it was financial difficulties that had the greatest impact on dropout: 16 of them (83%) considered this cause to have a high impact, and the remaining 3 (17%) considered it to have a medium impact. This was followed by a lack of institutional support, deemed to have a high impact by eight students (44%) and a medium impact by seven (39%). Also noteworthy were the causes related to the following: employment/work, regarded as having a high impact by 7 students (39%) and a medium impact by the remaining 12 (61%); the difficulty of keeping up with the course, assessed as having a high impact by 8 students (44%) and a medium impact by 6 (33%); and a lack of encouragement from teachers, rated as having a high impact by 6 students (33%) and a medium impact by 7 (39%).

What emerges from this analysis is that all respondents valued students' economic and social vulnerabilities (financial difficulties, employment/work-related issues) as causes of high dropout rates. There is also a lack of recognition by many coordinators of the institutional causes of dropout (lack of institutional support, lack of encouragement for students on the part of teachers), in contrast with the students, who recognized them.

By exploring the survey's open-ended questions, it was possible to delve a little deeper into the subject under analysis. The testimony of a student from the non-black category, who dropped out a geography degree, helps us to understand how financial difficulties can lead to dropout:

> There are even greater difficulties for minorities to remain at university, as they often don't have the financial means to pay basic bills and need to leave to work. [Non-black quota student]

Another black student stated:

> For the majority, black people who are poor or live on the periphery have to balance studies and employment, have difficulties commuting and finding opportunities in the job market, etc. [Black quota student—mathematics degree]

In the same vein, a course coordinator highlighted these sorts of causes of dropout:

> Many of these students find it difficult to stay at university, as they need to work to keep their livelihoods ahead. When they do find an opportunity, they have no choice—they start by taking a few subjects until they dropout. [Coordinator of the English language course]

As we mentioned above, other studies have identified similar causes (working and studying, lack of resources to buy material to study, or to pay for transportation) as being at the root of this type of student dropout [52–54,59]. Few economic resources are, therefore, one of the main causes of dropout.

Concerning institutional factors, student respondents reported different levels of intensity. Firstly, some of the testimonies pointed to more general aspects:

> I believe that in many cases, the university itself is not aware of the whole situation involving what a particular student is going through or facing. [Quilombola quota student—medicine degree]

> The university still hasn't managed to adapt to the different groups of people it receives today. [Black quota student—mathematics degree]

Other reports lead us to more concerning situations:

> From the short time I've been there, the management, the staff or anyone in the administration, the dean's office, already start treating you badly when you enrol, let alone giving importance to the student's needs. The veterans who guided me [...] we hardly have a voice there. [Non-black quota student—agronomy degree]

This statement highlights a sense of institutional disregard and, as in other studies, such as the one by Barbosa [19] on African-descendant women in higher education, it also underlines these students' feeling of a lack of visibility, of a "voice".

Such feelings are reinforced in the following two testimonies:

> Because most of the time, because we are indigenous, we suffer discrimination and prejudice from non-indigenous society, those who are considered white, whether directly or indirectly, and this has also happened at university. These preconceptions and discriminations are caused by the way we speak, dress, or even behave in society. [Indigenous quota student—languages degree]

> The university is still a colonial space that contains several systematic layers in which the feeling of belonging becomes difficult [...] which leads to the desire or need to leave the university environment. [Indigenous quota student—agronomy degree]

Moura and Matos [53], in a study conducted with indigenous students, also described the prejudice experienced by these students due to the fact that they are indigenous and have their own language, and how this situation hinders their continued presence at university: "It is a more regional language that is not accepted in the academic environment" (p. 18).

A study carried out by Alcaraz, Cruz and Padilla [60] on the presence and experiences of students of Latin American origin in Spanish universities, recognized certain preconceptions experienced by these students, including linguistic ones. Specifically, some students who took part in that study felt this prejudice because, despite speaking Spanish, they had a distinct accent, as in the case of the following student:

> In class, I didn't want to talk because I knew once people heard my accent, they were going to come up with a story about me [and my migration]. [60] (p. 13)

These and other situations are seen to contribute to a sense of non-belonging promoting withdrawal, as illustrated by the account of the indigenous quota student in the agronomy degree programme who took part in our study, transcribed above. As Barbosa [19] mentions, these situations make it difficult for students to feel a sense of affiliation.

A coordinator of one course gave an insight into this reality. Through her testimony, it can be seen that discrimination was carried out by her own colleagues, and that there was no institutional support:

> There are several causes, the reports I've heard from quota students (...) are usually people who come from other cities. I myself had a student (....) who is indigenous, quota and indigenous, she lived in the university residence, she even suffered racist attitudes in the university restaurant queue, while she waits for her turn to get her plate of food, she hears things like, why aren't you dressed as an Indian? why didn't you come making that gesture... smacking your lips, they make racist jokes, against the student and the students don't approach her, the students always leave her isolated, instead of seeking integration, don't they? Inclusion in their social networks, the students leave her aside, and when they can, they discriminate against her [...] she said that she was very sad because she thought that the university was a portal of opportunity for inclusion and that in fact she felt excluded, marginalised, discriminated against and without support from the university's services [...] she was going through great difficulties in terms of integration, so I was very struck by the story of this young woman, only 18 years old, when I approached her. [Coordinator of the English language course]

The study by Moura and Matos [53] (p. 15) describes similar discrimination by fellow students against indigenous students:

> There's nothing in the law course, nobody even likes indigenous people there, especially the sons of the rice farmers. The farmers' sons say: "You've taken my father's land". [...] "Ah, but because you don't work, because you're lazy, you want land for what?" (Participant 4, 2020).

Similar data have emerged from other studies that report the existence of this phenomenon within universities and other spaces and levels of education [12,52,61,62].

Further, it was possible to see through the students' testimonies, that some professors contributed to their dropout:

> Often teachers, unfortunately, increase the need to dropout and even encourage it by betting on student failure. Students who are about to drop out need to be heard and supported institutionally so that they don't give up; often psychological and/or financial counselling can prevent them from dropping out. The university needs to recognise, embrace, and support its students. [Black quota student—economics degree]

> Students, without institutional support... end up being forced to drop out. There are professors who claim they are there to make the students drop out because being at university is a privilege and it's only for a few. Teachers say that. [Black quota student—economics degree]

Behind this kind of discourse, we think there is the idea of merit, of gifts, but as Nogueira and Catani [63] (p. 56) argue, "one cannot conceive of students who are equal in rights and duties in relation to university language and university use of language without condemning the granting of a large number of inequalities to the gift, which are first and foremost social inequalities".

The relationship that teachers establish with their students has been proven to play an important role in their educational journey and can either hinder or favour it. For example, De Leernsnyder, Gündemir and Ağirdağ [64] conducted a study with international students in higher education in the Netherlands and concluded that teachers who take cultural differences into account contribute to the absence of cultural misunderstandings and encourage a feeling of inclusion and psychological safety among students.

The results we are presenting portray circumstances that make these students feel excluded and have no sense of belonging. Therefore, in addition to economic difficulties, the quota students also face symbolic difficulties [19,26] that materialize in a lack of institutional support and feelings of exclusion. In this way, the intersection of all these factors (economic and social vulnerability, lack of institutional support) helps to explain why these students drop out.

The perceptions of students and coordinators about affirmative action at the university under study are to some extent expressed in the experiences described above. These and other data from the survey allow us to argue that there are differing understandings of the actions implemented by the university. There seems to be a greater awareness of these actions among coordinators, as 13 (72%) of the 18 stated that they were aware of some institutional support measures at the university for black, indigenous and *quilombola* students, while 15 (78%) of the 19 students who took part in the study were unaware of any action. Most of them (13; 68%) also claimed to be unaware of any measures implemented in the degree course they attended.

4. Conclusions

We conclude that since the implementation of affirmative action policies relating to Brazilian higher education, there has been an increase in access by groups of students who have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education. This has mainly been after Law No. 12711/2012 and Decree No. 7824/12, which implemented the quota policy. This is confirmed by a recent study conducted by Heringer [65]. However, the author also concludes that the institutionalization of these policies is still limited in most Brazilian federal universities, with gaps present in terms of institutional support (for example, financial and pedagogical) given to this type of student and the promotion of their integration and sense of belonging.

Our results show that the study university has had affirmative action policies in place since 2007, and through these policies has guaranteed the existence of demographic

multiculturalism, that is, the simultaneous and interactive existence of several cultures in a given space and time [4,5], and programmatic-political multiculturalism [4], in the sense of implementing affirmative policies that aim to promote cultural diversity. However, this multiculturalism seems to be mainly restorative [44], in the sense that affirmative actions have been essentially focused on promoting access to university for these types of students. But equality of opportunity does not end there.

Indeed, the high number of students who have entered courses through the quota system and dropped out within ten years (2007 to 2017) of the university's affirmative actions (3518, or 38.1% of those enrolled), as well as the perceptions of participants in the research on the causes of dropout and on the affirmative action policy (especially the perceptions of students) highlight the existence of several gaps in institutional support, leading us to consider the possibility that the policy in question is not completely effective.

Therefore, we can say that our research question has a partially positive answer. In other words, the university's affirmative action policy guarantees access for black and mixed-race, indigenous and *quilombola* students through quotas and reserved places, but it is far from satisfactorily guaranteeing that these students remain at the university.

This seems to be a visible problem in many other Brazilian universities, which, according to Alves and Casali [66], still have a long way to go in terms of equal opportunities and multiculturalism. A similar situation exists in other contexts, including Australia [48], New Zealand [49,67], Chile [51], the United Kingdom and the United States [47].

Considering our results and those of other studies referred to in this paper, we believe that for truly inclusive multiculturalism to be effective, in order to achieve real equality of opportunity, at least two types of conditions should be fulfilled. Firstly, strategies and actions that guarantee effective financial support for students with economic difficulties should be implemented. This would involve reinforcing the funds that the state transfers to universities for this purpose and the creation or strengthening of monitoring mechanisms that universities should adopt to monitor these students and the assistance granted, preventing students from dropping out. Equally important as financial assistance is symbolic support. This refers to the acceptance and sense of belonging that these students should feel.

The approach to this type of support should not be based on the idea of a deficit, which exists, even among some teachers [68], but on the idea of difference and of diversity that needs to be respected. This can involve practices such as respecting and considering the cultural differences experienced by many of these students. For example, adjustments might be applied in the academic calendar for indigenous students, allowing them to celebrate festivals and cultural practices without jeopardizing their academic performance.

This could also involve combining Western academic knowledge and forms of knowing with those of the diverse cultures (black, *quilombola*, indigenous, among others) of students who arrive at/are at university [41,69,70]; experimenting with specific learning methodologies aimed at these students [31,48]; and reinforcing the multicultural training of teachers [51,64].

One way of making these strategies and actions more easily achievable would be to create or consolidate a body in which the university's different players are represented, including students and among them someone who represents quota students, so that their voices are taken into account. It would involve setting up a "regular listening channel" for students to foster "democratic exercise in the university" [71], with the aim of ensuring that diversity is more effectively addressed. The creation of a more effective data system to monitor these students in a timely manner could also be a way of improving the effectiveness of affirmative action policies.

If a university aspires to be multicultural, it should recognize that a positive relationship among cultures is not limited solely to welcoming the culturally excluded, but also making those who are admitted to the institution feel part of it. It remains to be seen whether universities, particularly those in Brazil, aspire to be truly multicultural and whether affirmative action is implemented to create the inclusive multiculturalism we advocate.

According to Heringer's study [65], the majority of Brazilian universities that she investigated have not yet managed to truly embrace affirmative action policies. From her perspective, this can be seen, for example, in the lack of systematized information they have about quota students, or by the absence of the subject of quotas in the institutional evaluation documents of many of these universities. In our research, this can be seen, for example, in the generalized lack of knowledge among the respondents (course coordinators and quota students) about the data on quota student dropouts, or the lack of knowledge among these students about the affirmative action policies that exist at the university.

Thus, steps have been taken in Brazil towards a multicultural university, but the path must continue to be taken.

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Notes

[1] In its 2022 Census, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) defines the categories it uses for race and colour: Indigenous as 'the person who declares themselves to be indigenous, both those who live in villages and those who live outside them, including in quilombola areas and in cities'.; White 'is the person who declares themselves to be white and has physical characteristics historically associated with European populations'.; Black, 'the person who declares themselves to be black and has physical characteristics that indicate predominantly African ancestry'.; and Mixed-Race is 'the person who declares themselves to be brown and has mixed races with a predominance of black traits'. (https://educa.ibge.gov.br/jovens/conheca-o-brasil/populacao/18319-cor-ou-raca.html, accessed on 2 September 2024). *Quilombolas* are the descendants of quilombo communities—hidden places, generally in the woods, that sheltered escaped slaves. These took different forms between the 16th century and 1888, when slavery was abolished in Brazil. *Quilombolas* have maintained cultural, subsistence and religious traditions over the centuries. The 1988 Brazilian Constitution guaranteed that the legalization of quilombo land ownership was the prerequisite for effective recognition of their rights.

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