



Article

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## EDUCATION AND REFUGE: NARRATIVES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS ABOUT ACCESS TO THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF RIO GRANDE DO SUL

Educação e refúgio: narrativas de estudantes estrangeiros sobre o acesso na Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Educación y refugio: narrativas de estudiantes extranjeros sobre el acceso a la Universidad Federal de Rio Grande do Sul

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**Abstract:** The human displacements that shape contemporary migrations have gained great relevance in national and international contexts, as they have intensified in recent years. The aim of this exploratory qualitative research is to problematize the selection process for admission of refugees to undergraduate courses, based on individual narrative interviews with six refugee undergraduate students. The analyses show that the students are satisfied with the experience but also suggest that the process needs to be enhanced in terms of: access to the call of applications; rigidity in the process of

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presenting documents; proof of proficiency; the distance between passing the Celpe-Bras test and being admitted to the undergraduate course.

**Keywords:** migration; refugees; higher education institution.

**Resumo:** Os deslocamentos humanos que dão forma às migrações contemporâneas passaram a ganhar grande relevância nos contextos nacional e internacional, visto que se intensificaram nos últimos anos. A presente pesquisa qualitativa exploratória tem por objetivo problematizar o processo seletivo para ingresso de Pessoas em Situação de Refúgio nos Cursos de Graduação, a partir de entrevistas narrativas individuais com seis estudantes de graduação refugiados. As análises apontam que os estudantes se sentem congratulados pela experiência, porém, também sugerem que o processo precisa ser qualificado em relação a: acesso ao edital, rigidez quanto ao processo de apresentação de documentos, comprovação da proficiência e distância entre a aprovação no Celpe-Bras e a inserção no curso de graduação.

**Palavras-chave:** migração; refugiados; instituição de ensino superior.

**Resumen:** Los desplazamientos humanos que configuran las migraciones contemporâneas han adquirido gran relevancia en los contextos nacional e internacional, ya que se han intensificado en los últimos años. El objetivo de esta investigación cualitativa exploratoria es problematizar el proceso de selección para la admisión de Personas en Situación de Refugio en los cursos de licenciatura, a partir de entrevistas narrativas individuales con seis estudiantes de licenciatura refugiados. Los análisis muestran que los estudiantes están satisfechos con la experiencia, pero también sugieren que el proceso necesita ser matizado en términos de: acceso a la convocatoria; Rigidez en el proceso de presentación de documentos; Prueba Celpe-Bras; Distancia entre la superación de la prueba Celpe-Bras y la admisión en el curso de licenciatura.

**Palabras clave:** migración; refugiados; institución de enseñanza superior.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, migration has gained special attention in national and international contexts, as global dynamics have been marked by the intensification of human displacement across borders, both voluntary and forced. Voluntary migration involves planned actions in which individuals move in search of better living conditions. In this case, they become migrants. Forced migration, on the other hand, is beyond the control of those who leave their country of origin. It occurs as an emergency measure and aims to ensure survival in the face of natural disasters, wars, ethnic, political, and religious persecution, among others. This situation often leads migrants to become refugees, who require legal protection from the countries where they seek asylum. (Giroto; Paula, 2020).

The latest report from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), published at the end of 2021, estimates that in 2020 there were 281 million migrants worldwide (approximately 3.6% of the global population). This number represents an increase of 128 million compared to 1990 and more than triple the total for 1970 (IOM, 2022). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in its annual report "Global Trends" (June 2023), points out that at the end of 2022, the number of people forcibly displaced—due to wars, persecution, and human rights violations—reached 108.4 million. This total represents the largest increase ever recorded, with 19.1 million more people compared to the previous year (UNHCR, 2023b).

According to UNHCR, 1 in 74 people worldwide is living in a situation of forced displacement. This number represents a 21% increase between the end of 2021 and the end of 2022. During this period, there were 35.3 million refugees, 5.4 million asylum seekers, and 5.2 million people in need of international protection, respectively. The war in Ukraine was the main factor driving displacement, leading to the fastest refugee flow since World War II: the number of people displaced by this conflict jumped from 27,300 at the end of 2021 to 5.7 million at the end of 2022. (UNHCR, 2023b).

In this context, it should be noted that the act of migrating affects those who move geographically, their descendants, and other people with whom migrants and refugees interact at their destinations. Thus, discussions on this issue have entered national agendas, academic research, and various debates regarding its different aspects. However, in terms of the admission of refugees to higher education institutions in host countries, particularly universities, relatively little research has been conducted.

At the end of 2022, there were approximately 66,000 recognized refugees in Brazil (Junger *et al.*, 2023). A significant number of these refugees are young adults, at an age and with the capacity to pursue higher education. However, many face difficulties in becoming or remaining university students, mainly due to the challenges of social adaptation.

Considering this scenario, new laws have been enacted to guarantee protection and rights for refugees in Brazilian territory, including those related to admission to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In addition, agencies linked to the United Nations

(UN) have developed actions with the national government and universities to provide opportunities for migrants and refugees to enter and remain in higher education. However, according to Rosa (2018a), despite the differentiated access conditions that are already offered, the number of refugees entering HEIs is still insignificant, which points to a discrepancy in some situations.

Even though public and private universities offer special admission programs for refugees, obtaining degrees is a challenge for many, due to difficulties in accessing these programs, lack of financial and linguistic resources, and, in many cases, prejudice. Such barriers prevent refugees from rebuilding their lives through better professional skills and achieving social and cultural representation. As a result, a paradox emerges: even with increased legal guarantees, access to higher education for refugees remains low and, at times, non-existent.

In this context, this article aims to problematize the selection process for the admission of refugees to undergraduate courses, based on the narratives and meanings produced by refugee students at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). This university has proposed offering, alongside other welcoming initiatives, access to higher education for refugees in accordance with Law No. 9,474 of July 1997 (Brazil, 1997), better known as the Refugee Statute, together with the Migration Law No. 13,445 of May 2017 (Brazil, 2017) and other applicable legislation.

The study draws on literature in the field and, primarily, on narratives from six refugee students at the university. Their accounts help to identify the supporting factors and obstacles they faced in accessing the courses they attend. Beyond highlighting the situations and emotions involved in their journeys, their insights can contribute to the improvement of public reception policies.

To this end, an overview of discussions on refugee access to Brazilian universities is presented. The general methodological approaches and the findings that guided and emerged from the research are then described. Finally, the development of processes aimed at ensuring the admission of refugee students to UFRGS is discussed, along with the students' narratives regarding admission notices and the linguistic challenges they encounter in their daily undergraduate studies.

## 2 THE ADMISSION OF REFUGEES TO BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITIES

Debates about forced migration highlight the importance of protecting the fundamental rights of refugees; however, this cannot be seen solely as a legal mechanism. Inclusion processes are needed to guarantee dignified living conditions for refugees in the countries that welcome them and, at the same time, strengthen the laws that govern them. Inclusive actions, in this sense, support these individuals in adapting to host societies and vice versa, serving as tools for education in coexistence and hospitality (Rollo *et al.*, 2023).

Redin and Monaiar (2018) argue that inclusion and social integration policies are supported by the so-called durable solutions (voluntary repatriation, local



integration, and resettlement) provided for by the Refugee Statute. These outcomes stem from dialogue among Latin American and Caribbean countries involved in the Cartagena Process, aimed at advancing the “construction of the foundations for the comprehensive protection of refugees and migrants” (p. 749). Thus, education is established as a key mechanism for comprehensive protection.

In this context, ensuring refugees’ access to education in the same learning environments as the host population, across different levels, is crucial for improving their living conditions and creating opportunities for social advancement. Accordingly, affirmative policies that reserve places and promote differentiated selection processes in HEIs play a key role in fostering inclusion and the democratization of education. (Bertoldo, 2020).

In Brazil, education falls under the responsibility of federal, state, and municipal governments, although the latter two levels do not have specific responsibilities in terms of migration, dealing only with the immediate reception of refugees. At the federal level, according to Costa and Peixoto (2018), protection and inclusion mechanisms may include recognizing foreign university degrees, incorporating refugee-related topics into university curricula, facilitating refugees’ access to higher education, and the teaching of Portuguese. Through these initiatives, “it is possible to bring refugees closer to society, providing them with social integration and knowledge of the local culture, generating the creation of bonds and the breaking down of prejudices” (Costa; Peixoto, 2018, p. 525).

According to data from the Refuge in Numbers Report, in 2022, Brazil received 50,355 applications for refugee status, which, added to those registered since 2011, totaled 348,067 applications filed since the beginning of the last decade (Junger *et al.*, 2023). Of the applications received in 2022, the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE) recognized 5,795 refugees in Brazil, 56% of whom were male and 44% female. Of these, 4,053 were between 15 and 59 years old, meaning that approximately 70% are of an age for academic/professional training and entry into the labor market. It is also important to note that this number of people recognized in 2022, added to those recognized up to 2021, totaled 65,840 recognitions (Junger *et al.*, 2023).

In a study conducted by UNHCR and Cátedra Sérgio Vieira de Mello (CSVM) on the socioeconomic profile of refugees in Brazil, it was concluded that this population has high linguistic and educational capital, “above” or “well above” the Brazilian average, if only black and brown people are considered, with whom most refugees are comparable. Among the 487 refugees who participated in the study, distributed across eight states of the federation, only 0.6% declared themselves illiterate, 2.7% reported not having completed elementary school, 50.21% had completed high school, and 31.33% reported having completed higher education. It should also be noted that among those who had completed higher education, 9% had also taken graduate courses. Regarding the possibility of continuing their studies in Brazil, the data show that 60% of respondents expressed interest in continuing their studies; however, only 9.52% had their diplomas revalidated in Brazil. In addition, around 68.18% do not use their professional skills in their current jobs (UNHCR 2019).

These figures demonstrate, for example, that refugees are often unable to make use of their professional skills in host countries, showing that the migration process, especially forced migration, causes people to occupy lower-level jobs than they could otherwise hold. This causes social and economic losses for migrants in general and refugees in particular. Thus, there are clear flaws in the processes of inclusion of these individuals with regard to their study and work practices.

According to Redin and Monaiar (2018), local inclusion poses multiple challenges in the daily lives of those who experience migration, both because of structural inequality at the political level and because of everything that "mobility represents in human subjectivity, both for those who arrive and those who receive them" (pp. 749-750). For this reason,

[...] local policies, such as differentiated procedures for the admission of refugees adopted by universities, supported by international refugee law and domestic legislation, have proven to be fundamental in the process of recognizing the rights not only of migrants recognized as forced and, therefore, covered by protection, but also of other immigrants, whose reality has revealed situations of multiple vulnerabilities in the economic, social, and political spheres (Bertoldo, 2020, pp. 71-72).

Therefore, we can see the importance of universities' participation in the processes of comprehensive protection and inclusion of refugees, especially through affirmative action to facilitate entry. Integration and inclusion movements represent the possibility of exercising the right to migrate, of recognizing the other, from the perspective of otherness, their rights, and their migration project, which are generally denied in the normative order and on the margins of the State's hospitality (Redin; Monaiar, 2018).

However, inclusion must be understood as a process that involves the participation of civil society and state institutions, as well as the UNHCR. In this sense, Bertoldo (2020) points to the First Conference on Migration and Refuge (Comigrar) as an action of expanded dialogue to support actions that promote the convergence of state agendas, especially with regard to education policies. Thus, issues such as raising awareness and training teachers, staff, students, and the academic community in general on migration, as well as encouraging the creation of institutional mechanisms like university chairs, emerge as key priorities in addressing migration and refugee-related challenges.

In this way, opening higher education to and with refugees through affirmative action to facilitate admission is consistent with actions of inclusion and hospitality, as they "take into account the vulnerable situation of refugees and asylum seekers and may make places available exclusively for refugees, asylum seekers, and/or migrants in vulnerable situations" (UNHCR, 2020, p. 12).

Currently, facilitated admission for refugees is optional, meaning that each university has the autonomy to decide on the request and the opening of differentiated selection processes, with no unified rules or procedures. In Brazil, facilitated access is

still a recent initiative, having started in 2003 with the CSVM. The Chair stands out not only for its work in teaching, extension, and research, but also for its various *advocacy* actions that directly benefit the refugee population in Brazil—revalidation of diplomas and academic admission, academic disciplines and research groups at universities with themes related to refuge, Portuguese classes, psychosocial care, legal guidance, and job placement.

In this sense, the presence of refugees enrolled in HEIs demonstrates the important role played by institutions associated with CSVM in regulating the processes for facilitating the admission of refugees or asylum seekers. As of July 2023, the Chair was working in partnership with 39 public and private higher education institutions from all regions of the country (UNHCR, 2023a). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, approximately 420 places were guaranteed for refugees and asylum seekers in undergraduate courses, representing a 10% increase over previous years. Between 2021 and 2022, there was an increase of approximately 83.5% in the number of places and 30.5% in the number of undergraduate students enrolled in universities (UNHCR, 2021, 2022). Between 2022 and 2023, the CSVM, together with HEIs, guaranteed 962 specific places for refugees and asylum seekers in undergraduate courses, with 613 undergraduate students currently enrolled through this selection process (UNHCR, 2023a).

The existence of several universities that already adopt differentiated admission policies reinforces the role of institutions as actors within the support and protection networks for refugees and migrants. However, it should be noted that, even in the face of a legal paradigm shift and the growing number of universities adhering to inclusion proposals, there are also opposing movements, such as in the case of the Federal University of Roraima (UFRR), where the courts were called upon to legitimize obstacles to the incipient policy of welcoming and integrating refugees in Brazil (Silva-Ferreira; Lodetti; Borges, 2021).

In this situation, as previously noted, despite legal provisions favoring support for refugees, it was the lack of hospitality that blocked the process. This demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the articulation between educational processes that strengthen the logic of inclusion and hospitality and the legal frameworks that aim to empower the lives of these individuals. Thus, further exploration of the topic is relevant, especially when viewed from the perspectives of migrants and refugees. It is in this direction that the research presented seeks to promote insights that help to improve special admission processes to universities.

### 3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article is based on qualitative and exploratory research conducted with refugee students who entered the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) through special admission programs for refugees in undergraduate courses in 2018 and 2019. A total of 26 students were approved in these processes, but the data for this research were produced from individual narrative interviews conducted with six participants between June and August 2021.

Initial contact with the students took place in university work and study groups. In each group, a refugee student was invited to participate in the research, after which additional potential participants were identified through the snowball technique. This technique involves forming a non-probabilistic sample based on referrals by key informants, documents, and/or the initial participants themselves. With this specific type of sampling, it is not possible to determine in advance who will participate in a study; however, the technique is useful for studying certain groups that are generally difficult to access (Vinuto, 2014).

The interviews were conducted online, via Google Meet, recorded, and subsequently transcribed in full. The transcripts were made available to participants for evaluation and reformulation of the information, when necessary. However, all participants authorized the use of the original versions, i.e., without modifications.

Their narratives allowed us to observe experiences that constituted meanings of what it is like to be a refugee student at a public university. It should be noted that narratives are never neutral, as they are loaded with historical, social, and cultural conditions. Therefore, the individual is not considered the original source of their speech, but rather part of the discursive and sociocultural network that allows them to express themselves in certain ways and not in others (Andrade, 2012). Thus, the post-critical assumption was adopted: the production of the subject takes place in the realm of language, discourses, texts, representations, utterances, modes of subjectivation, and relations of power and knowledge, i.e., "in the relations of discursive forces that name and govern it" (Andrade, 2012, p. 174).

To make their experiences, both inside and outside the university, visible and to give voice to the refugee community, it was decided (at the request and with the consent of the interviewees) to use the names they chose, regardless of whether these were officially registered. In this regard, it should be noted that the research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UFRGS, under CAAE N°. 45217521.3.0000.5347.

Based on this, two thematic sections were organized for the discussion of the participants' narratives, understood as research results. It was also deemed necessary to explain, beforehand, the path that the university took to develop special admission notices for refugees, in order to contextualize the discussions.



## 4 SELECTION PROCESS FOR REFUGEES AT UFRGS

According to UFRGS (2019), the specificities of admission to higher education for migrants and refugees have been established since 2017 to account for the current Brazilian sociodemographic landscape, transformed by new migratory flows. In this sense, authors such as Hillesheim and Weber (2018), Couto and Hillesheim (2018), and Versiani and Carvalho Neto (2021) have shown that the configuration of international migratory flows has changed, both in terms of the number and direction of routes and the subjects who are part of these movements.

This highlighted a greater need to pay attention to South-South movements, established by groups of Latin American refugees who, instead of heading to countries in the Global North, seek protection and/or better living conditions in countries in the Global South, impacting societies that were not traditionally accustomed to receiving them. Brazil has become one of the main destinations, which has led to a demographic reconfiguration and a transformation in the ways of understanding migration, which until then had been associated with European immigrants who helped to shape Brazilian society. However, this dynamic does not occur smoothly, as social resistance movements are frequent, highlighting the importance of inclusion actions.

UFRGS, therefore, began to consolidate public notices to ensure better conditions for the inclusion of migrants and refugees. This movement began in 2014, when the University's Superior Council (Consun) approved the admission of refugees to undergraduate and graduate courses. At the end of 2015, based on Decision No. 366/2015 (UFRGS, 2015), in line with other legislation in effect, the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies (Prograd) began to consolidate public notices.

This admission modality is based on an understanding of rights to social inclusion and a policy of recognizing differences, in accordance with discussions about affirmative action. In addition, it is supported by international humanitarian law. Thus, the Affirmative Action Commission (CAF) is directly involved in formatting and monitoring, as well as in bringing together partners to strengthen its implementation. In addition to CAF and Prograd, other sectors of the university cooperate with the admission of migrants and refugees, namely: the Secretariat of International Relations (Relinter), the Portuguese Program for Foreigners (PPE) of the Institute of Letters, CSVM, the Advisory Group for Immigrants and Refugees (Gaire), Department of Education and Social Development of the Dean of Extension (DEDs/PROEXT), School of Employee Development of the Dean of Personnel Management (EDUFRGS/PROGESP), and UFRGS/PROEXT Museum (UFRGS, 2019).

The selection process is modeled on the UFRGS internal transfer process, as the undergraduate committees decide on the types of tests to be used (written, practical, letter of intent, interview) and also on the composition of the examination boards. The process calendar, however, is organized in a unified manner by Prograd. The special admission process has remaining places in in-person undergraduate courses for refugees, which were offered through four public notices – 2017/2018, 2018/2019, 2019/2022, and 2023/2023.

It should be noted that, initially, the public notices were issued one year prior to admission. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the public notice published in 2019 was suspended until May 2022, which also altered the calendar for the 2023 public notice, with both publication and admissions occurring in the same year. All public notices, as well as some reports on innovations, affirmative action, and social inclusion at the institution, are available on the university's website, in the CAF section (UFRGS, 2023).

To enroll as a special student in the refugee category, direct participation in the PPE is important, as it guarantees linguistic and academic support for those selected during the first semester or year of enrollment. The PPE prepares students to obtain the Certificate of Proficiency in Portuguese for Foreigners (Celpe-Bras), a proficiency test in Portuguese as an Additional Language (PLA). Upon obtaining an intermediate level on the exam, those selected become eligible to enroll in undergraduate programs at UFRGS (UFRGS, 2019).

The announcements show a gradual increase in the number of places available and the diversity of courses, which indicates that the admission of refugees to undergraduate courses has been well received. However, throughout its implementation, some weaknesses have been identified regarding the documentation required, enrollment procedures, and administrative organization, as highlighted in many of the interviewees' narratives below.

## **5 UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSION: NARRATIVES ABOUT CALLS FOR APPLICATIONS AND REGISTRATION**

It is important to begin this section by noting that the six participants (three men and three women) come from three different countries: Haiti, Venezuela, and the Republic of Congo. Of these, five consider themselves black and claim to follow a religion or religious belief. The interviewees were between 23 and 35 years old, five were single, and one was married. Three lived in Porto Alegre (RS), and the others resided in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre, with two paying rent. All had been in Brazil for more than three years (4.5 years on average), and five had already started a higher education course in their countries of origin.

Coming from education systems that differed from those they found in Brazil in terms of regulations, structure, and content, the research participants emphasized that, despite being more hierarchical and rigid—which most pointed out as a positive aspect—the academic structure that allows the continuity of education in Brazil is very important in their lives. According to them, the possibility of higher levels of education, especially at no cost, can contribute to their personal growth in terms of opportunities and to their countries of origin if they return. This fact enhances their desire to seek new perspectives on life through study and motivated them to enroll at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.

Associated with this, they report that the process of adapting to a new life in a new country is not easy; however, through public incentives related to quality study and training conditions, there are greater chances of success. Thus, we can see the importance that students place on obtaining places at Brazilian universities through differentiated admission, with regard to better conditions for inclusion.

However, even though they are satisfied and grateful for the opportunities offered by the university's public notices, it is important to reflect on what they point out as greater rigidity in comparison to their countries of origin. There is a legal framework that, in many cases, disregards the specific regulations associated with education in different countries, establishing a logic of compulsory adaptation that aims to achieve local standards through universalizing perspectives. It is understood that, in order to keep up with local quality levels and requirements, refugees need to adapt, without, in many cases, institutional adaptations to meet their demands.

This does not occur in an imposing manner, but, as discussed in the methodological approach, it articulates and transforms these people's ways of life, producing individuals who conform to the process. This is a movement that contradicts the precepts of inclusion, since, from this perspective, the aim is to transform realities for the better adaptation of all, without establishing certain standards as the best.

When asked about access to the public notice, most emphasized that the search took place on the internet, through individual motivation and with the help of friends and/or relatives, as was the case with Chidelson, Baely, and Dulce, whose testimonials appear below:

I went after everything. No one told me anything, I went after everything. I researched. I went online [...]. Then I found the announcement. I went first, then I spread the word to other immigrants as well (Chidelson, 2021).

I applied for the regular announcement, [...] but I didn't get in [...] shortly after, my cousin saw on the internet that UFRGS had published an announcement for immigrants and refugees. We were always looking at the announcements from federal and private universities here, on the internet (Baely, 2021).

When I was in Boa Vista, I already did some research. We are afraid to go so far away. Is there a music college? And I saw that UFRGS was one of the best (Dulce, 2021).

Given these narratives, it is possible to think that informal support networks for refugees become significant in terms of access to university. It is through these networks that many are able to access announcements and understand how they work, especially when faced with bureaucratic processes that are very different from those in their countries. In a study on access to health services by migrant women, Rocha *et al.* (2013) and Teixeira *et al.* (2022) highlight that, in the face of institutional challenges encountered in host countries, it is networks of acquaintances that effectively guarantee assistance when needed. In the absence of such networks, refugees often decide to set aside their goals due to the difficulty of achieving them.

Although most of the students interviewed did not criticize the conditions for accessing public notices, some pointed out that there is still a certain difficulty in obtaining the document. Alexandra, for example, mentions difficulties in accessing (lack of information/dissemination) and navigating the website:

They make the same public notices for different populations, as if everyone were Brazilian and had the same access to the public notice. [...] They disseminate it like any other public notice. If you come from somewhere else, sometimes you don't even know how to read properly, or how to use a computer, so how are you going to find it? [...] If you go to the UFRGS website, you go to undergraduate courses and there are the subjects and the normal public notice. I only found out about this public notice because I was interested in entering UFRGS. [...] I don't think it's being publicized in the right way to reach the right population! I don't know how other people found out about it, but for me, luckily, when I went to take Portuguese for foreigners at UFRGS, the coordinator told me about this announcement (Alexandra, 2021, emphasis added).

The way in which the announcement is disseminated, in Alexandra's view, reflects a lack of sensitivity and focus in reaching the target audience of the admission process, namely refugees. For Rosa (2018b), it can be inferred, initially, that refugees, in most cases, do not seek admission to public universities due to the lack of information on the official websites of higher education institutions. For this reason, Rocha, Azevedo, and Mendes (2022) emphasize the importance of accessible mechanisms for disseminating information, because as refugees arrive in the country without speaking the language, it would be necessary for HEIs to make information about facilitated admission procedures (websites, notices, resolutions, etc.) available in other languages, such as English, French, and Spanish, through wide dissemination.

Careful attention to language, even before an individual undergoes the selection process, can already function as an exclusionary criterion, as it disregards those who have been in the country for a shorter period of time (Rossa; Menezes, 2017). Thus, ensuring accessible information in terms of language is also crucial for the registration process, access to documentation, and participation in the selection process. Greater linguistic accessibility can help reach more people and ensure that their questions are addressed (Rocha; Azevedo; Mendes, 2022).

Furthermore, the selection and admission notices for refugee students in Brazilian higher education sometimes require documents in Portuguese, but the applicant may not be fluent in the language, which undermines the purpose of the process (Rosa, 2018b). This barrier, established by the language and culture of the host country, even at the information stage of the process, hinders access to HEIs, because "the question of hospitality begins here: should we ask foreigners to understand us, to speak our language in every sense of the term, in every possible extension, before we can welcome them among us?" (Derrida; Dufourmantelle, 2003).



This is the case at UFRGS, which requires that all documentation from applicants in a foreign language, with the exception of Spanish, be translated into Portuguese (Peres, 2020). These actions, in addition to burdening prospective students, become barriers for many that make it impossible for them to enroll.

When recounting their experiences with the enrollment process, most students highlight the bureaucracy involved in the documents that must be submitted, as follows:

There is a lot of bureaucracy involved in enrolling. I know it's a federal university, but there is a lot, a lot of bureaucracy. Because there are documents that we were asked to stamp at the Haitian embassy, then they [State Department of Education] went to check with the Ministry of Education in our country [...] to see if this person had actually completed high school. [...] in the first [call for applications], my cousin was excluded because of this [time to return the documentation], because he couldn't do it. Mine arrived in 22 days. His took almost two months, [the application deadline] ended, and he couldn't do it. (Baely, 2021).

You have to get your diploma recognized [at the State Department of Education], and it's a hassle. You get there, you have to go through the process, you have to follow up on the process, and it takes a long time, a long time, a long time. I did everything myself, the documents, and after getting the paperwork, there's the translation, because the documents all have to be in Portuguese. That's the problem. Because it's fine, I have the diploma, but I need the equivalence, and where do I do that? (Zuri, 2021).

One area for improvement is precisely the documentation. Because some people won't be able to get all that documentation, because of Haiti, because of the country. Because in Haiti, they won't be able to legalize some documents. For some, it's not easy. [...] I had to get my degree revalidated, you have to go first to the Ministry of Education in Haiti, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Haiti, and the Brazilian Embassy in Haiti, and when I got here, the time I had to spend at the Department of Education. [...] It's not even easy for people who have the documents. [...] It takes two years, sometimes three years, to get a place. [...] It's a lot of red tape! And for someone who comes here, let's say, who has fled their country because of war, from Palestine or Syria, when they arrive here, they won't be able to prove it and it will be much more difficult (Rogério, 2021).

As can be seen, even though there is a differentiated admission offer, there are difficulties associated with acquiring and translating some documents. Access to high school certification, highlighted in the excerpts above, is one of the documents that students find most difficult to obtain, both because of the language and the bureaucratic process involved in accessing it. According to Baely (cited above), the equivalence of his cousin's high school diploma took more than sixty days to be ready, which caused him to miss the deadline for university enrollment.

UFRGS specifies the documents that can serve as high school equivalency; however, the process is slow and, in some cases, costly due to translation into

Portuguese. According to Lapa *et al.* (2019), these documentary issues, rather than making the processes more secure, can create barriers to immigrants' and refugees' access to higher education.

The CAF Report for improving this issue points out that the process is intended for an audience with very specific demands. Therefore, the announcement should not only be a document about courses and forms of admission but also offer information on how to achieve high school validation in Brazil, for example. One of the main difficulties for people in refugee situations is the legalization of school documents (UFRGS, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary for universities to seek alternatives so that this fact does not become an obstacle for migrants (Peres, 2020).

After the registration phase, in which documentation is submitted, students undergo other selection processes that are determined individually by the courses. With regard to the tests and other selection criteria, most agree with the methods and highlight the selection process as positive, since most of the process can be conducted in other languages (such as English, French, Spanish, or, in some cases, the candidate's native language).

However, some courses still require that certain exams be taken exclusively in Portuguese, which, according to some students interviewed, makes it difficult to remain in the courses. For Gonçalves (2019), inclusion policies that make admission conditional on knowledge of Portuguese, rather than including people, end up excluding them. In this sense, Rosa (2018b) argues that linguistic inclusion is a condition of hospitality for these individuals and, therefore, needs to be addressed.

## **6 INTEGRATION INTO THE UNDERGRADUATE COURSE: THE LINGUISTIC OBSTACLE**

After passing the UFRGS selection process, students must prove their proficiency in Portuguese through Celpe-Bras. This exam certifies proficiency in Portuguese as an Additional Language (PLA) and considers textual and discursive aspects. It is conducted in writing, in order to assess written production in Portuguese, and orally, to assess comprehension of the language. Only students with proficiency at the intermediate, upper intermediate, advanced, and advanced-superior levels are certified (INEP, 2020).

The requirement to take the Celpe-Bras exam for university admission was one of the most polarizing points in the research interviews. According to Rosa (2018b), although legally legitimate and constitutive of institutional discourse, the process of control and limitation is generated by mechanisms that influence the construction of knowledge about foreign refugees. These mechanisms include the consequent threat of losing their place. This implies the assumption that the foreigner does not possess such proficiency. In the foreground, the refugee is deprived not only of their native language, which is devalued, but also of the experiences and knowledge they have gained through it (Rosa, 2018b).

The laws of hospitality require that foreigners understand us not only in linguistic and cultural terms, but also in legal terms, since, as the announcement states, interested students unreservedly accept the conditions of the document and the selection process as a whole (Derrida; Dufourmantelle, 2003). The requirement for refugees to learn Portuguese through an exam that assesses their proficiency has a limiting effect, since “foreigners must, even if they are unable to do so, submit to the language of the host, who, by giving refuge, reaffirms himself as master, authority in his home” (Rosa, 2018b, p. 1545).

Through its Institute of Letters, UFRGS offers an extension course in Portuguese for students, known as PPE, which is open to anyone interested in enrolling. In addition to helping students pass the Celpe-Bras exam, the PPE facilitates the social life and mobility of future candidates who are refugees, as it issues a certificate of enrollment in an extension course, which allows them to obtain discounts on public transportation, such as trains and buses (UFRGS, 2019).

In the reports below, we can see the experiences of the interviewees regarding the exams:

[...] because it is a new modality, I understand that they are organizing themselves to find the best way to do it, but this modality of passing the entrance exam first, which the University required [selection process], then having to pass the PPE, then the Celpe-Bras. In my view, the Celpe-Bras should not be the final test if I have already passed the entrance exam. If I have the PPE certificate and don't have the Celpe-Bras certificate, I lose my place at UFRGS, which I got through the competitive exam. That's what I don't understand and find a bit confusing. It's something that UFRGS should rethink, because this process makes things difficult. (Rogério, 2021).

I believe that, in a way, if I didn't speak Portuguese, I don't know if I would be able to move forward, because the teacher won't have to speak another language to teach me. [...] But it hurts because it determines your admission to college, I think that's the key. Because someone who doesn't have the Celpe-Bras, unfortunately, ends up losing their place (Zuri, 2021).

As can be seen in the reports, everyone agrees on the need to understand the language for inclusion in the learning process, but they question the need for two certificates. While studying the PPE for a year, the student's academic status is assured; however, obtaining a place, conditional on participation in Portuguese classes and subsequent approval in Celpe-Bras, leads them to postpone entry into the course and/or even lose their place. In this sense, according to Lapa *et al.* (2019), bureaucratic procedures, such as gathering and translating documents, revalidating diplomas, and taking proficiency exams, can take more than a year, hindering immediate access to higher education.

The following statements corroborate with this situation:

I understand that it is necessary, extremely important if you are going to take an undergraduate course, to be proficient in the language, right? You take a test, I passed the test, I'm talking to you, we understand each other, so why do you need the Celpe-Bras test to let me start the course? Why can't you let me take an alternative test? Because, anyway, I lost a year because of this, you see, that's my whole struggle (Alexandra, 2021).

And another thing I find kind of unnecessary is that we take the UFRGS Portuguese test, the PPE gives us a certificate, but that certificate isn't valid for the course. In fact, you take a test, a dissertation, to get into the university. [...] then you have to present a PPE certificate, and after all that, if you don't pass the Celpe-Bras, you'll lose the whole process that took you two years to complete. There was a case of a Haitian woman who passed the PPE, so the PPE says she is qualified, that she speaks Portuguese, but she didn't get the Celpe-Bras, and she lost her place, [...] Of course, you have to speak Portuguese well, but the PPE is a certificate, and it is recognized by UFRGS [...]. But why, if the PPE gave me this, do I need to present a language certificate from abroad? (Rogério, 2021).

For Peres (2020), regarding UFRGS, the greatest bureaucracy in its process is related to the presentation of the Celpe-Bras. This is because students who have won a place at university and do not have the required proficiency are given the opportunity to study for a year at the PPE, which would be sufficient to prove their acquired language skills. Peres (2020), therefore, questions whether all this effort contributes to student dropout, given the entire migration process they have undergone.

Despite the one-year interval for everyone to learn Portuguese and pass the Celpe-Bras assessment, the CSVM at UFRGS also sees this as a major challenge to be faced. Although the university provides Portuguese courses for foreigners, there are difficulties arising from the fact that those who pass are not immediately enrolled in undergraduate courses, such as the impossibility of students receiving student aid (UNHCR, 2020). This fact is also reiterated in the Report of the Affirmative Action Commission of UFRGS (UFRGS, 2019).

Therefore, it is important to review the timing of student enrollment to shorten the gap between passing the Celpe-Bras and entering the undergraduate program, in order to allow students to access benefits from the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs (PRAE). To this end, the CAF Report (UFRGS, 2019) points to the urgent need to outline a policy to support refugee students. It even suggests that creating a package of resources specific to the University would be important to facilitate student participation in Portuguese classes for foreigners. This support is particularly relevant at a time when students are beginning to reorganize their lives and daily routines, preparing to enroll in undergraduate programs.

These alternatives indicate that whether or not students remain at the university begins to be determined as soon as they enroll in PPE courses, even before they formally enroll at the institution, since they cannot afford to just take the course and



need to work to support themselves. Sometimes, they are unable to reconcile the two activities due to various factors, but mainly financial ones.

To try to minimize this issue, CAF/UFRGS suggests the possibility of introducing more types of Portuguese language tests, organized by UFRGS, that are equivalent to Celpe-Bras, in order to adjust schedules that currently depend on a single centralized test and with certificates arriving late for semester enrollment (UFRGS, 2019). This is the case, for example, at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), which has many students who have proven their proficiency in an internal test and are managing to keep up with their semesters, and the University already has graduates (Peres, 2020). An alternative, also pointed out by the CAF/UFRGS Report, would be to develop PLA tests for speakers of other languages, similar to Celpe-Bras, in two editions: in February, allowing enrollment in undergraduate courses in March of the same year, and in July, for enrollment in August.

Furthermore, before concluding the discussion, it is important to highlight that these issues are not limited to the university where the research was conducted. Other discussions, such as those by Trindade and Cotinguiba (2023) and Gediel and Barbosa (2021), have shown that refugees face significant obstacles to inclusion in host countries, especially in terms of access to basic social rights, such as health, education, and work. Although there are legal frameworks for international protection, the enforcement of these rights is limited by bureaucratic, cultural, and linguistic barriers. In addition, social stigmatization and xenophobia reinforce situations of marginalization, hindering the full integration of these individuals into host communities (Redin and Reichert, 2024; Rollo et al., 2023; Bertoldo and Redin, 2021). This condition tends to accentuate social vulnerability, producing experiences of exclusion that affect not only access to services but also social belonging and identity.

## 7 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

When discussing the challenges and potential of the special admission public notices for refugees at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), the students emphasized the importance of the process, their gratitude for the opportunity to enroll, and indicated that the negative points are presented as a way to contribute to the improvement of the process.

As a positive point, they highlighted, first, the fact that there is a differentiated call for applications for refugees, because despite the advances made, it is still a process that does not exist in all universities, either inside or outside Brazil. Thus, for most students, both the call for applications and the admission process are very powerful public policies for access to higher education. As for the negative aspects, the main highlight was the delay in admission to the undergraduate course, due to the Celpe-Bras requirement.

As mentioned above, students fathom the importance of understanding Portuguese, but they regret the requirement for an external certificate, considering that

UFRGS offers the PPE and the student has already gone through a selection process. Thus, for them, requiring Celpe-Bras to start the course makes the process bureaucratic and, therefore, promotes exclusion instead of inclusion.

The following were also listed as negative points: the lack of information (especially regarding guidance on the necessary documents); the lack of support for students, especially refugees who do not speak Portuguese; the lack of publicity for the announcement (which fails to reach the target audience widely); the fact that there are not enough places for all courses; and that the call for applications is open to all migrants, regardless of their legal status.

Finally, most interviewees made the following suggestions: that alternative language proficiency tests be accepted, not just Celpe-Bras; that announcements be translated into other languages; that alternative media be considered for differentiated publicity of the announcement, in order to reach the target audience as widely as possible; and that channels and services be created to welcome and support refugee students entering UFRGS, as all of them mentioned a lack of information and guidance regarding their rights and university services.

Despite existing initiatives, the context indicates the need for UFRGS to broaden discussions on linguistic issues involving immigrants and refugees, as well as on a policy to support refugee students, since they may (or may not) represent vulnerability in terms of access to rights and integration, both at the university and in the host community. In this sense, we emphasize that the challenges posed by the presence of refugees are fundamental to (re)thinking a truly diverse, pluralistic, and critically engaged university, which involves recognizing others and their subjectivities, in addition to valuing their knowledge and cultures.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the article “Education and refuge: narratives of foreign students about access to the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul”.

## Data availability

The data underlying this research are contained within the article.

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