

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1982-57652025v30id29079822>**THE STATE IN ACTION: MULTIDIRECTIONAL APPROACHES TO COMBATING DROPOUT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

El estado en acción: enfoques multidireccionales para combatir la deserción en la educación superior

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Abstract: The article analyzes the actions of the Brazilian State to combat dropout rates in higher education. The research is qualitative and is based on legal and regulatory documents issued by national public entities, with a focus on the mentioned phenomenon. The analysis begins with the understanding that, since 1988, a set of actions has been aimed at promoting student retention and addressing dropout in higher education. Historically, the Brazilian State has played a role in this effort through educational policies. The results show that national policy adopts multidirectional approaches, such as student assistance programs; the use of educational indicators as guiding tools for institutional decision-making; the creation of committees to deepen knowledge on dropout and propose public measures to address it; the inclusion of the dropout issue on the legislative agenda; and the use of artificial intelligence tools as innovative proposals. These actions suggest the existence of a movement established as a State policy. However, the implementation of these multidirectional measures faces significant challenges, such as a lack of focus among national managing bodies and the shifting of responsibility away from public institutions regarding the resolution of the issue.

Keywords: educational policies; combating dropout; higher education.

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Resumo: O artigo analisa as ações do Estado brasileiro para combater a evasão na educação superior. A pesquisa é qualitativa e utiliza documentos legais e normativos emitidos por entes públicos nacionais, com foco no fenômeno mencionado. A análise parte da compreensão de que, a partir de 1988, um conjunto de ações tem sido voltado para a permanência estudantil e o combate à evasão na educação superior. O Estado brasileiro, historicamente, atua nesse combate por meio de políticas educacionais. Os resultados mostram que a política nacional adota abordagens multidirecionais, como a política de assistência estudantil; o uso de indicadores educacionais como medidas indutoras para a tomada de decisões pelas instituições; a criação de comissões para aprofundar o conhecimento sobre a evasão e propor medidas públicas para seu enfrentamento; a inserção da pauta da evasão na agenda do poder legislativo; e a utilização de ferramentas de inteligência artificial como propostas inovadoras. Essas ações indicam a existência de um movimento constituído como política de Estado. No entanto, a implementação dessas medidas multidirecionais enfrenta desafios importantes, como a falta de foco nas ações dos órgãos gestores nacionais e a desresponsabilização dos órgãos públicos em relação à resolução da problemática.

Palavras-chave: políticas educacionais; combate à evasão; educação superior.

Resumen: Resumen: El artículo analiza las acciones del Estado brasileño para combatir la deserción en la educación superior. La investigación es de carácter cualitativo y utiliza documentos legales y normativos emitidos por entidades públicas nacionales, con foco en el fenómeno mencionado. El análisis parte del entendimiento de que, a partir de 1988, un conjunto de acciones se ha dirigido a la permanencia estudiantil y al combate de la deserción en la educación superior. Históricamente, el Estado brasileño actúa en este enfrentamiento mediante políticas educativas. Los resultados muestran que la política nacional adopta enfoques multidireccionales, como la política de asistencia estudiantil; el uso de indicadores educativos como medidas inductoras para la toma de decisiones por parte de las instituciones; la creación de comités para profundizar el conocimiento sobre la deserción y proponer medidas públicas para su abordaje; la inclusión del tema de la deserción en la agenda legislativa; y el uso de herramientas de inteligencia artificial como propuestas innovadoras. Estas acciones indican la existencia de un movimiento configurado como política de Estado. Sin embargo, la implementación de estas medidas multidireccionales enfrenta desafíos importantes, como la falta de enfoque en las acciones de los organismos gestores nacionales y la falta de responsabilidad de los entes públicos en relación con la resolución de la problemática.

Palabras clave: políticas educativas; combatir la evasión; educación superior.

1 INTRODUCTION

When addressing the perspective of state action in the formulation and implementation of public policies, Höfling (2001) argues that this process constitutes the very notion of the “State in action”—that is, the proposal of actions and intentions across diverse fronts to resolve public issues in various sectors of society. Far from being a neutral or homogeneous entity, the State operates through institutional mechanisms, whose actions materialize state intentions in the form of public policies that may simultaneously express strategic directions and inherent contradictions.

This article is based on the premise that the actions of the State determine the flow of educational policies in various directions, aiming to meet broad and previously defined objectives, with the scope of meeting certain social demands. This multidirectionality—understood as the coexistence of different paths and approaches of public policy—reflects the complexity of State action, which may involve both structural measures and temporary initiatives, whether as a response to circumstantial pressures or as an expression of State policy.

Regarding higher education, while there are national policies to expand access (Mancebo; Vale; Martins, 2015; Silva; Veloso, 2013; Gomes; Moraes, 2012), there has been a movement over the years in favor of defining educational policies that also focus on student retention in public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In parallel, some efforts have aimed at addressing student dropout (Santos Junior; Real, 2017; Maciel, Cunha Júnior; Lima, 2019), a phenomenon that has shown increasing rates over the years. According to data from the Higher Education Census, recent years have seen dropout rates nearing 60%.

Beyond student assistance measures implemented, which are part of educational policies, through programs such as the National Student Assistance Program, Plano Nacional de Assistência Estudantil (Pnaes) — established by Ministry of Education Normative Ordinance No. 39, dated December 12, 2007 (Brasil, 2007a), Decree No. 7,234, dated July 19, 2010 (Brasil, 2010), and the recent Law No. 14,914, dated July 3, 2024 (Brasil, 2024a) — other dimensions of educational policy impact the daily operations of universities. Among them, the monitoring indicators stand out, formulated to encourage public HEIs to develop dropout prevention mechanisms, such as the Undergraduate Success Rate and the Equivalent Student concept, used by the Federal Court of Accounts, Tribunal de Contas da União (TCU), since 2002.

The movement also encompasses complementary pathways, signaling action in multiple directions at different points in Brazil’s recent history. As will be detailed throughout this article, key areas of focus include initiatives by the Ministry of Education (MEC) to create committees tasked with studying and proposing measures to reduce dropout; attempts to establish a Student Trajectory Indicator (ITE) for undergraduate programs; investments in linking dropout prevention with artificial intelligence tools; and the integration of this issue into the national legislative agenda.

Understanding the State's action in this regard implies considering that, even though there are fragmented actions through temporary policies, the idea of equal conditions for access and permanence has been defined since the 1988 Federal Constitution (CF) as a measure of the State, and not just of the government, with initiatives proposed from different governmental perspectives.

It is noted that this issue is present in the structured agenda of the Brazilian state, as it promotes the right to education, whose historical development has increased the demand for higher levels of education.

Therefore, the ideal of promoting student retention over dropout has been present for nearly four decades, spanning various political administrations with different perspectives and revealing that there are direct and ongoing concerns about the occurrence of this phenomenon in higher education.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the inclusion of this issue in educational policy, whether in basic or higher education, has at times progressed in large strides and at other times in small steps. However, within a historical context spanning several decades, addressing the issue of dropout has remained a consistent demand from the Brazilian State.

Bucci (2006) argues that the scope of State policies goes beyond what is set out in the constitutional text, pointing to a complex expansion of this concept. Other nuances must be considered when thinking about lasting State policies. From this point of view, the multiple directions for combating dropout corroborate and signal the State's action on educational agendas, which, based on its structures, is put into action by dictating directions through policies with this purpose.

Given that such policies extend beyond temporary government administrations and aim to ensure fundamental rights on an ongoing basis, dropout prevention has become a structural concern of the Brazilian State within its educational policy, evidenced by the continuity of regulatory measures and the inclusion of this topic in the public agendas of different governments and authorities.

As Azevedo (1997, p. 61) asserts, "a public policy for a specific sector arises from an issue that becomes socially recognized as a problem. From a problem that is widely discussed by society, demanding action by the State."

Thus, as a challenge to the democratization of higher education, dropout has historically gained space on the public agenda, even amid stagnation or discontinuities of policies promoted by the transformations of the Brazilian State (Sallum Júnior, 2003).

The study adopts a theoretical framework grounded in public policy analysis as proposed by Azevedo (1997) and Figueiredo and Figueiredo (1986). It uses as guiding elements the normative documents produced by government agencies that outline the measures taken by the Brazilian State to address the issue of dropout. The aim is to clarify the criteria that underpin the multidirectional approaches adopted by the Brazilian State and to offer contributions toward the development of such policies.

In addition to this introduction, the article is organized into six additional sections and a concluding remarks section. Initially, an overview of the movement to

combat dropout in higher education is presented, identifying actions and intentions recorded in normative and guiding documents issued by state entities. The other sections outline the multiple directions of national policies in search of mechanisms to overcome dropout, seeking to reveal this process as a movement of the State. Finally, the concluding remarks aim to consolidate the analyses undertaken.

2 ACTIONS TO COMBAT DROPOUT RATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Access to and retention in school are established as constitutional principles, as stated in Article 206 of the Federal Constitution (Brasil, 1988), which promotes equal opportunities for achieving this educational pathway. By treating education as a duty of the State and focusing on issues of educational equality, there is a need for regulation and delimitation of actions focused on access and retention, which initially concentrates on basic education but later also involves higher education.

Policies developed, especially after the enactment of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB) (Brasil, 1996), support this issue through complementary actions, such as the creation of the budget matrix for Other Costs and Capital (OCC), in accordance with university autonomy, and programs aimed at access and retention such as the Program to Support the Restructuring and Expansion Plans for Federal Universities, Programa de Apoio a Planos de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais (Reuni), the Unified Selection System (SISU) and National Student Assistance Program (Pnaes), the first for federal universities and the second and third for all Federal Institutions of Higher Education (Ifes).

State policy has placed such emphasis on these issues that the National Education Plan, Plano Nacional de Educação (PNE), developed in 2001 and 2014, included this demand in their objectives, targets, and strategies, anticipating student assistance measures as mechanisms directly responsible for combating dropout rates.

Since the 1990s, marked by a historical legacy of restricted access to higher education across all social groups, up to the policy-driven push for mass university enrollment in the following decade, the potential for progress through these measures has faced wide-ranging, complex challenges. Among relevant examples of these obstacles, it is worth mentioning the Constitutional Amendment No. 95/2016 (Brasil, 2016), which imposed a cap on public spending in education and directly impacted the implementation of educational policies, in addition to the more recent implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, which reconfigured the internal dynamics of HEIs and imposed significant challenges for the effective provision of higher education.

It is worth noting that the democratization aspects of higher education goes beyond simply counting the number of students entering this level of education and begin to consider their trajectory at the university, from admission to retention and subsequent completion of the course (Dias Sobrinho, 2010; Silva; Veloso, 2013).

Regarding dropout, understood as a social phenomenon counter to democratization, even though it is a phenomenon that is present, with varying degrees of significance in different HEIs, there are difficulties in improving actions aimed at controlling it, especially with regard to university initiatives, which have included few demands related to dropout control in their institutional planning (Santos Junior, 2022; Pacheco; Tete; Monsueto, 2024).

Although national policies have, at times, followed an uneven trajectory, as will be discussed throughout this text, there is a formal expectation that public universities themselves to develop mechanisms to combat dropout. With regard to national guidelines, public agencies monitor the daily practices of HEIs. This debate corroborates the issues of relative autonomy of universities, which are remotely controlled by the State through its educational sectors, as discussed by Oliveira (2006) when mentioning the influence of the systemic evaluation process in inducing educational policies.

Thus, State action is connected to a set of norms and directives aimed at ensuring the effectiveness of higher education provision. Even though regulatory frameworks at this educational level still lack precision regarding dropout (Coimbra; Silva; Costa, 2021), there is a visible body of norms, programs, and governmental actions designed, in their most basic dimension, to provide quantitative and qualitative services to the target audience of higher education and, consequently, seek to retain students and prevent dropout as a means of ensuring the effectiveness of the education of those who enter this level of education. Table 1 presents these actions.

Table 1 – State Actions to Combat Dropout in Higher Education Since the 1990s

Action	Instrument	Main Objective	Involved HEIs
Creation of a Special Study Commission on Dropout in Brazilian Public Universities	Sesu/MEC Ordinances No. 90/1995 (Brasil, 1995)	Diagnose student dropout in public universities	Public higher education institutions
Encouragement of the adoption of student assistance programs – PNE 2001–2010	Law No. 10,172/2001 (Brasil, 2001)	Encourage the adoption of student assistance programs	Public higher education institutions
Induction to dropout control through educational indicators from the Federal Court of Accounts (TCU)	Plenary Decision No. 408/2002 (Brasil, 2002)	Monitor and guide dropout management	Federal higher education institutions
Induction to dropout reduction and increase of the Undergraduate Success Rate (TSG) through the Reuni Program.	Decree 6,096/2007 (Brasil, 2007b)	Reduce dropout rates and increase the TSG in federal universities	Federal universities
National Student Assistance Policy	Normative Ordinance No. 39/2007 (Brasil, 2007a), Decree No. 7,234/2010 (Brasil, 2010), and Law No.	Expand student assistance in federal HEIs	Federal higher education institutions

	14,914/2024 (Brasil, 2024a)		
Creation of a commission to propose support measures for developing strategies to combat dropout in on-campus undergraduate programs at federal universities	Sesu/MEC Ordinance No. 125/2012 (Brasil, 2012)	Propose measures to combat dropout in federal HEIs	Federal universities
Permanence Grant Program	MEC Ordinance No. 389/2013 (Brasil, 2013)	Support the retention of low-income students	Federal higher education institutions
Encouragement of the expansion of student assistance policies – PNE 2014–2024	Law No. 13,005/2014 (Brasil, 2014)	Expand student assistance policies in public and private HEIs	Public and private higher education institutions
Creation of the Undergraduate Student Trajectory Indicator – ITE	MEC Normative Ordinance No. 8/2016 – repealed	Monitor students' academic progress in undergraduate programs	Higher education institutions
Methodology for Calculating Higher Education Flow Indicators	Inep Document (INEP, 2017)	Establish a methodology to calculate academic flow indicators	Higher education institutions
Integrated Support System for Academic Success	Solemn Session (BRASIL, 2022)	Implement academic support to improve student retention	Federal higher education institutions
Creation of a special advisory commission with the purpose of conducting a diagnostic assessment and presenting a proposal of actions to address the phenomenon of undergraduate student dropout within the context of Federal Higher Education Institutions (Ifes)	Sesu/MEC Ordinance No. 17, August 14, 2023	Conduct a diagnosis and propose actions to address dropout in federal HEIs	Federal higher education institutions

Source: Prepared by the authors.

It is evident that, since the creation of the Special Study Commission on Dropout Rates in Brazilian Public Universities (Brasil, 1995), marking the inclusion of dropout as a concern on the government's agenda, the approach to this phenomenon has shifted and become part of subsequent government actions in a ramified process.

One facet of education policy focused on student assistance as a key strategy in combating dropout at federal universities. Simultaneously, another line of action involved national oversight bodies, which began to monitor the quality of educational services provided by universities, as well as the outcomes presented to society. A third dimension related to the attempts by MEC, as the central managing body for education, to stimulate discussion on student retention and dropout, whether through the creation of new indicators or the establishment of working groups to explore this

issue in greater depth. There is also a fourth axis: the incorporation of the dropout issue in higher education into the debates initiated by the National Legislature. Finally, more recently, artificial intelligence has been used as a way to understand and act on the phenomenon under study, through the Integrated System to Support Academic Success, Sistema Integrado de Suporte ao Sucesso Acadêmico (Sissa), launched in 2020.

The remaining sections of this article provide a qualitative analysis of these initiatives.

3 THE FOCUS ON STUDENT ASSISTANCE

Student assistance has become one of the main strategies developed by the State for the higher education level, particularly concerning the access-retention binomial, thus representing a direct action to combat dropout. The legal foundation for this policy was established with the publication of Normative Ordinance No. 39/2007 (Brasil, 2007a) by the MEC. This document served as a complement to the political focus at the time on expanding higher education through specific programs for this purpose, representing “[...] the consolidation of a historic struggle to guarantee student assistance as a social right aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for public higher education students” (Vasconcelos, 2010, p. 608).

This development involved coordination among entities linked to universities, such as the National Union of Students (UNE), the National Forum of Deans for Student Assistance (Fonaprace), and the National Association of Directors of Federal Higher Education Institutions (Andifes).

As outlined in Decree No. 6.096/2007 (Brasil, 2007b), which created the Reuni program, its goal was to establish conditions for expanding access to and retention in higher education. Although this decree marked a significant step in consolidating the expansion policy, with major decisions already on the agenda, specific mechanisms to ensure student retention through targeted policies had yet to be formally established. This process began with the publication of the normative ordinance that created the Pnaes, issued a few months after Reuni’s introduction.

According to its guidelines, Normative Ordinance No. 39/2007 required Ifes to implement student assistance initiatives linked to teaching, research, and extension activities, directed toward students enrolled in on-campus undergraduate programs, preferably those from socioeconomically vulnerable backgrounds. The objective was to ensure equal opportunities for these students, contributing to the improvement of their academic performance, as well as preventing situations of dropout and course repetition (Brasil, 2007a).

The focus of the actions was on initiatives in the areas of student housing, food, transportation, healthcare, digital inclusion, culture, sports, childcare, and academic support. However, although the policy defined its general scope, it did not specify how

it should be implemented, leaving the responsibility for defining implementation methods to each Ifes, as long as they did not exceed the focus established by the Pnaes.

In turn, Decree No. 7.234/2010 (Brasil, 2010) further reinforced student assistance as a as a guiding policy of the State for student retention. This document added new guidelines, such as ensuring access, participation, and learning for students with disabilities, global developmental disorders, high abilities, and giftedness. As a result, Pnaes took on broader contours and renewed momentum in its role as a key driver of student retention — especially due to the expansion of its scope and equity criteria.

Furthermore, a significant development regarding the program's focus came with the refinement of selection criteria, placing greater emphasis on students from public schools and priority related to socioeconomic vulnerability (Brasil, 2010).

Within this context, additional policies followed a similar path. One example is the Permanence Grant Program, established through MEC Ordinance No. 389/2013, with the explicit aim of minimizing social, ethnic and racial inequalities and the consequent retention and graduation of undergraduate students from Ifes in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability.

Similarly, the PNE 2014–2024 began to refer to the expansion of student assistance policies as a key strategy for reducing racial and ethnic inequalities and increasing access to and retention in higher education. A noteworthy point about Pnaes is that the program obtained its own budget, with the transfer of resources occurring through the State (as the financing agent) and management carried out by the Ifes (as the implementing agents).

With Pnaes widely embedded in university contexts and increasingly aligned with other public actions, Law No. 14.914/2024 (Brasil, 2024a) was enacted, establishing the National Student Assistance Policy. This development shows that, after first being proposed during the drafting of the initial PNE (2001–2014) and enduring through successive governments, student assistance has become one of the State's principal strategies for combating dropout in higher education and promoting student retention in Ifes. Although not sufficient on its own (Goldrick-Rab, 2023), the institutionalization of Pnaes underscores its potential to increase the effectiveness of student retention initiatives at federal universities.

4 MONITORING AND POLICY GUIDANCE THROUGH EDUCATIONAL INDICATORS

A second direction in the policy movement related to combating dropout is the establishment of performance indicators for Ifes, with the TCU acting as a directly interested and coordinating entity. Beyond encouraging monitoring, actions like this provide mechanisms to promote practices deemed positive by the agency responsible for defining these metrics.

As the external audit body of the federal government, with the goal of “being a reference in promoting an effective, ethical, agile, and responsible public administration,” the TCU engages with Ifes with the aim of promoting “accounting, financial, budgetary, operational, and asset oversight of public agencies and entities in the country regarding legality, legitimacy, and economy.”

Within a context of accountability, a process notably aligned with neoliberal policy guidelines established since 1990, besides its auditing role, the TCU has progressively set performance indicators for institutions that can influence university management, and the implementation of practices aimed at fulfilling its recommendations. Thus, the institutional agenda of federal universities currently combines everyday internal matters with demands imposed by entities like the TCU.

Regarding the definition of management indicators for Ifes, the Court’s involvement dates back to the 1990s, when this agency began to conduct audits of these institutions (Cruz, 2004).

Based on plenary decisions throughout the 1990s, when the TCU conducted a kind of survey and audit on universities to include them among accountable institutions, Plenary Decision No. 408/2002 consolidated nine indicators for use by Ifes: Current Cost/ Equivalent Student; Full-Time Student/Teacher; Full-Time Student/Employee; Employee/Teacher; Student Participation Rate; Involvement in Postgraduate Studies Rate; Capes/MEC Concept for Postgraduate Studies; Faculty Qualification Index; and Undergraduate Success Rate (TSG).

The establishment of these performance indicators aimed to create a monitoring system to support the MEC in designing its actions, as well as to assist internal management and evaluation processes within the institutions themselves. Such indicators were thus identified by the TCU as necessary components of institutional self-assessment. Consequently, they came to be understood as measures of higher education quality, as seen, for example, in TCU Ruling No. 506/2013 (TCU, 2013).

Concerning the link between performance indicators and dropout rates, a close look at the variables used by the Court reveals its interest in encouraging Ifes to base their management plans on the effectiveness of the student’s journey: admission, retention, and graduation. Two indicators stand out in this regard: the TSG and Current Cost/ Equivalent Student.

The TSG is directly related to monitoring and developing measures to combat dropout, while the Equivalent Student indicator is indirectly connected to dropout control. Following the institutionalization of the OCC Matrix via MEC Ordinance No. 651/2013, an annual funding distribution instrument was established for federal universities. According to Article 3 of this ordinance, the amount allocated to each university “[...] includes the number of equivalent students at each university, calculated from indicators related to the number of enrolled and graduating undergraduate and postgraduate students at each federal university” (Brasil, 2013c, art. 3).

Without intending to detail the variables composing the mathematical formula that calculates the Equivalent Student, it is important to highlight that the number of

graduates represents a significant component of this calculation. This demonstrates that programs producing more graduates — that is, with a higher TSG — contribute more substantially to the university's funding through the OCC Matrix.

Sant'Ana (2016), then National Coordinator of the National Forum of Deans of Planning and Administration of Federal Higher Education Institutions (Forplad), argued about the inductive factors of the OCC Matrix for combating dropout and promoting retention. In his analysis, the Equivalent Undergraduate Student was a critical parameter since it accounted for 77.7% of the OCC Matrix composition for Ifes that year. In this sense, these institutions, through this indicator, are indirectly held accountable for the phenomena affecting the values obtained from the Equivalent Student calculation and, consequently, leading to variations in their annual budgets. Academic analyses focusing on the relationship between managing this indicator and reducing dropout remain scarce in the educational policy literature (Santos Junior; Real, 2017).

In summary, there is a clear inducement of the public financing policy for Ifes related to dropout control within the institutional context. In other words, institutions are held accountable for the results of the educational process they offer. The definition of educational indicators by the TCU therefore represents one of the approaches adopted by the Brazilian State to combat dropout — specifically through an inductive policy mechanism.

5 THE DEBATE THROUGH MEC WORKING GROUPS

A third branch of the policy movement under analysis is the creation of working groups aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the nuances of dropout. Actions in this regard, although directly focused on dropout prevention, were limited to specific resolutions that were ineffective in the institutional context, since they did not interfere with budgetary standards in order to enable the suggested measures.

By focusing on this phenomenon as a complex event related to individual characteristics as well as internal and external institutional factors, the pioneering commission established by the MEC in the 1990s produced several important recommendations. The focus was on public HEIs, both state and federal, with nearly 90% participation from Ifes. Among the recommendations, given the historical context of higher education, were the need to create flexible curricula, improve teacher training, invest in scholarship programs, maintain laboratories and libraries, establish internship agreements, promote cultural and recreational programs, implement pedagogical actions in courses with high failure rates, produce course promotional materials, and update academic curricula, among other points (Brasil, 1997).

These listed actions reveal a diversity of approaches, reflecting the multifactorial causes of dropout and the need for multiple strategies to address it. Notably, some of these themes remain relevant today, nearly thirty years after the group published its

findings, and they continue to underpin institutional justifications for their efforts to combat dropout (Santos Junior, 2022).

Therefore, the areas studied by the Commission are significant and, for the most part, remain current, intertwining and enriching the understanding of dropout in the more recent context of higher education (Santos Junior; Real, 2017; Maciel, Cunha Junior; Lima, 2019).

In the final year of Reuni implementation, the Secretariat of Higher Education (Sesu) created a commission to provide input for developing strategies to combat dropout in on-campus undergraduate courses at federal universities. Named the "Working Group for Studies on Academic Dropout," its responsibilities included identifying the dropout landscape, proposing strategies to reduce it through various institutional actions, and coordinating interinstitutional publications related to successful experiences in combating dropout at federal universities.

Among the group's outcomes were data from studies presenting a dropout overview in eight universities, highlighting the importance of partnerships between MEC and HEIs to systematize studies aimed at understanding local dropout factors (Nunes, 2013).

Subsequently, MEC took a further step toward structuring national higher education by creating indicators and initiating discussions about their implementation. This effort involved government entities such as the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research "Anísio Teixeira" (Inep), the Secretariat for Regulation and Supervision of Higher Education (Seres), and Sesu, alongside university representative bodies such as Andifes and the Forum of Deans for Undergraduate Education (Forgrad).

Through MEC Normative Ordinance No. 08, dated April 28, 2016, nine indicators associated with the quality of higher education were formulated. One of these was the "Indicator of Undergraduate Student Trajectory," which includes the "retention rate, dropout rate, and completion rate" (Brasil, 2016a).

This action revealed a path consistent with the proposals for expanding access to higher education that had been implemented. With the progressive increase in student numbers resulting from expansion policies, dropout came to be seen as contradictory to the expectations in planning for this educational level. As a result, combating dropout was incorporated into the agenda for new national policies related to higher education quality, gaining prominence.

However, the change in the country's political and governmental direction in the year that the indicator was created led to the revocation of the aforementioned ordinance through MEC Normative Ordinance No. 15, dated June 22, 2016 (Brasil, 2016b). This was one of the announcements signaling new directions for higher education that diverged from the project established in previous years. Despite this, considering dropout a persistent challenge embedded in State educational policies, a new element revived discussion on the indicators.

In 2017, the year following the repeal of Ordinance No. 08/2016 (Brasil, 2016a), Inep published methodologies for calculating Flow Indicators in Higher Education, based on data from the Higher Education Census, focusing on monitoring academic trajectories as the main way to promote retention and degree completion.

In brief, three indicators were considered: Retention Rate, Cumulative Completion Rate, and Cumulative Dropout Rate. Further breakdowns using statistical data could identify eleven additional indicators directly or indirectly related to dropout—referred to as “desistance” in the published document.

This demonstrates that, despite the repeal of the government act, internal sectors of the Ministry continued to express concern about dropout and other issues related to university life and persisted in promoting academic trajectory indicators as a means of monitoring academic data within the federal higher education system.

In other words, even though the establishment of new indicators for higher education through government policy in 2016 was met with an attempt at discontinuity, there was already a consolidated perspective on addressing dropout through State actions. Regardless of government transitions with differing political views, the pursuit of understanding and formulating measures to combat dropout (at various levels) has been deeply rooted in Brazilian educational policy through the efforts of various public sectors and agents involved.

Finally, amid the recent complex political landscape in the country, and despite no explicit renewal of focus on dropout in educational policy or on achieving positive impacts in federal universities’ performance, MEC has sought to revive the debate. This is reflected in the creation of a Special Advisory Commission tasked with diagnosing and proposing actions to address undergraduate student dropout in Ifes, established by Sesu/MEC Ordinance No. 17, dated August 14, 2023 (Brasil, 2023b).

This indicates that MEC has historically formed study groups to deepen knowledge about dropout causes and to develop public measures to combat it, especially in federally maintained higher education institutions. Although these groups are represented by government managers, their existence is tied to the structures of the Brazilian State.

Other initiatives by the MEC are occurring in response to the modernization of society and the increasingly strong presence of digital technologies. Among the diverse directions taken by the policy, there is a recent focus on the use of these tools, as explained below.

6 THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO COMBAT DROPOUT

In a recent context of proposals for the modernization and innovation of the federal public service, the use of artificial intelligence as a tool to help combat dropout began to be considered by MEC, which acted as partner and funder of the Integrated System to Support Academic Success (Sissa), a project coordinated by the Federal University of Goiás (UFG) and executed by the Center of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence (Ceia).

The system was created through public funding of a project called P&D: Artificial Intelligence to assist actions aimed at reducing dropout in higher education, approved in 2020 (CEIA, 2020; Brasil, 2022). The initiative included a pilot phase involving the following institutions: UFG, the Federal Rural University of the Semi-Arid Region (Ufersa), the Federal University of Pampa (Unipampa), the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), the Federal University of Itajubá (Unifei), and the Federal University of São Carlos (Ufscar). These universities were selected by MEC based on geographic location and the dropout rates reported in the Higher Education Census.

The project was initially planned for two years of implementation at the mentioned institutions. However, after this period, in December 2022, the system was formally launched with plans for its use by other Ifes, highlighting MEC's Executive Secretariat and Sesu as the project developers.

At the official launch event in December 2022, hosted by MEC representatives, it was stated that Sissa is a dropout management tool for universities, offering support for students to complete their courses. It uses public higher education data, especially individualized data from each university, to develop artificial intelligence algorithms that predict dropout risk at various levels. Software integration allows the presentation of dropout risk indicators on a dashboard, showing aggregated risk by classes and specific courses, as well as individual student dropout risk.

Complementing this, the project includes training and deployment of student tutors responsible for welcoming and monitoring students identified and referred by course coordinators. Students with the highest risk of dropout are prioritized for pedagogical or support interventions, and the activities performed by tutors or coordinators are recorded on an indicator's dashboard, which guides planning of internal institutional actions.

With the adoption of the Integrated System to Support Academic Success (Sissa), there is a clear direction in educational policy toward predicting dropout — that is, anticipating the problem based on institutional data, enabling targeted actions focused on students at greatest risk.

As a recent initiative, the impacts of Sissa on dropout rates in institutions that have adopted it have not yet been explored in the academic literature. Although it presents itself as a direct strategy to combat dropout, its effectiveness remains

unknown. Still, according to its official webpage, the system has already been implemented in fourteen federal institutions (Brasil, 2025).

The implementation of Sissa marks a turning point in addressing dropout by incorporating artificial intelligence as a preventive management tool. The proposal demonstrates a governmental effort to improve the use of data to anticipate risks and guide interventions, although empirical evidence of its effectiveness is still lacking. Despite its novelty, the system points to a new direction in educational policy, combining technological innovation with student retention actions.

However, what contributes to the debate proposed here is MEC's role as an interested party and funder of the initiative, which reinforces the observation of the multidirectional nature of dropout prevention actions stemming from State structures, even if the implementation processes are decentralized to the institutions themselves.

7 THE INCORPORATION OF DROPOUT INTO THE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Beyond the intentions expressed by the executive branch through the creation of public measures aimed at combating dropout in multiple directions, the legislative branch began to incorporate this topic into its agenda.

A direct example of this can be seen in a technical study conducted by the Legislative Consulting Office of the Chamber of Deputies in 2016, aiming to "[...] analyze aspects that influence student dropout in undergraduate programs of Brazilian federal institutions of higher education (Ifes)" (Gilioli, 2016, p. 4). The publication of the study entitled *Dropout in Federal Institutions of Higher Education in Brazil: Network Expansion, SISU, and Challenges* represented an unusual involvement of the Legislative Branch in the field of education, especially higher education and the more specific issue of dropout.

This movement indicated the intention of state public powers to undertake a broader and more complex reading of the results reported by institutions. A similar path was taken by the judiciary in the process of judicializing education in various ways, driven by the impacts of provisions in the 1988 Federal Constitution but prompted by repeated societal demands (Cury; Ferreira, 2009).

However, this time, the legislative branch's initiative to better understand dropout — a topic apparently more specific and under the executive's responsibility via MEC — may be mainly related to the public evaluation of significant programs for access to higher education and the results achieved by institutions, disclosed through the Higher Education Census and each institution's Management Reports.

After presenting conceptual, methodological, and causal aspects of dropout, the study conducted by the Chamber of Deputies more specifically outlined the reality of dropout in individual institutions, especially by relating dropout to the SISU system. According to the report's author, the complexity of the dropout phenomenon increases when SISU is adopted by institutions (Gilioli, 2016).

As a conclusion, the technical study indicated that, besides national programs such as Reuni and Pnaes, institutions are responsible for developing and implementing internal policies, which are considered the most effective measures to address the phenomenon (Gilioli, 2016).

This conclusion aligns with the set of actions formulated by the State to combat dropout, which assigns the most effective control to internal university management mechanisms, as illustrated by the student equivalent indicator discussed earlier.

Following the publication of the aforementioned technical study, the Chamber of Deputies continued to express its intentions to participate in the planning process for actions aimed at developing higher education, which, in an associated manner, involves combating dropout, through the creation of two Working Groups.

The first was created by Presidential Act on August 14, 2018, establishing a group to evaluate challenges and propose an agenda for public HEIs. With a ninety-day deadline, the President of the Chamber justified the group's creation due to the need to systematize a diagnosis capable of identifying the main problems, challenges, and prospects of Brazilian public HEIs, given the urgency to understand the new dynamics of these institutions and their relationship and interface with society.

As reported in the Working Group (WG) report (Brasil, 2018b), besides proposals related to budgetary issues, personnel hiring, university extension, completion of unfinished works, quotas in funding calls to mitigate regional inequalities, and technological innovation, dropout prevention appeared in the report under two proposals: transforming Pnaes into law to guarantee legal security for the policy, and improving SISU to reduce student retention and dropout.

With special focus on the first proposal, justified by the fact that Pnaes has the potential to achieve the goals and strategies of the National Education Plan (PNE, 2014-2024) in its central objective of promoting student retention and reducing retention and dropout rates, the WG argued it is "[...] fundamental that Pnaes be elevated from a government program established by regulatory norm [...] to a State policy enacted into law, with permanent status" (Brasil, 2018b, p. 45).

The second Working Group, created by the Chamber of Deputies via Presidential Act on March 29, 2019, was tasked with monitoring and evaluating the Brazilian university system. Again, the group's general concerns were broad. However, issues related to student retention and dropout were only timidly addressed in its work.

In its final report, released in April 2020, which included systemic analyses of public and private higher education, the group reinforced the institutionalization of Pnaes as a relevant measure for the context of federal institutions of higher education, a point already made by a previous working group (Brasil, 2020).

It is evident that demands historically presented by representatives of Ifes and students influenced the state's decision to address the proposal presented. To some extent, this legislative action may have been effective in consolidating the proposal, given that recently Pnaes was incorporated into the Brazilian legal framework through Law No. 14,914/2024 (Brasil, 2024a), as mentioned earlier in this text.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the members of the mentioned working groups were professors from federal universities, including those holding coordination and rapporteur roles within the committees. This composition shows that the focus on combating dropout through internal institutional measures — as pointed out in Gilioli's (2016) consultancy report — was not a highlight in the reports prepared by the later working groups. This indicates that internal university agents, represented in the WGs, also believe Pnaes is the main path forward.

8 BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: LIMITS OF STATE ACTIONS IN COMBATING DROPOUT

Since the 1990s, starting with the creation of the Special Commission for Studies on Dropout in Brazilian Public Universities, up to more recent initiatives such as the implementation of Sissa and the institutionalization of Pnaes, the Brazilian State has demonstrated ongoing concern with student dropout. This continuity, despite advances and setbacks, shows that combating this phenomenon has been structurally and systematically incorporated into the public agenda, pointing to a policy that, although strained by intergovernmental disputes, persists as an expression of the federal pact and the notion of education as a social right.

Therefore, this article opts for the thesis that there are elements of State policy when it comes to combating dropout, a process that mobilizes different agencies and sectors in decision-making. More direct examples can be found in the actions of the TCU and the legislative branch, both representative entities of national policy organization and State powers beyond the Executive. This indicates that addressing dropout institutionally mobilizes various dimensions of the State, surpassing the logic of isolated policies.

It is clear that there are difficulties and challenges in establishing concrete, focused actions to combat dropout. Although pursued in various directions, the main focuses of national policy have been on establishing inducement policies, such as the variables composing the Equivalent Student indicator monitored by the TCU, and assistance to socioeconomically vulnerable groups, as the central premises of Pnaes. The use of artificial intelligence is recent, and there is yet no evidence confirming its effectiveness across Brazilian universities. The set of mentioned actions indicates that these measures do not relieve HEIs of the responsibility to define actions that effectively address the problem; on the contrary, they delegate this task to them.

Analyzing the effectiveness of this set of actions on dropout incidence proves to be a complex process, considering the various approaches adopted and the phenomenon's multicausality. According to Figueiredo and Figueiredo (1986), this analysis involves both political evaluation—which examines the criteria and justifications underlying the formulation of these policies—and assessment of their implementation and impacts. It is observed that the adoption of these interventions is

justified by the national higher education scenario itself, marked by high dropout rates that drive the creation of strategies for mitigation, even if these responses do not always align with principles of equity and quality retention.

The pursuit of realizing the constitutional right to education at the highest levels engenders a need for the State to promote actions controlling dropout, using the effectiveness of the higher education system as a criterion.

On the other hand, the ineffectiveness of inducement actions within higher education institutions exposes some vulnerabilities of ongoing policies, such as: (i) the lack of targeting in measures by national management bodies that seek to operate through a kind of remote-control strategy, holding institutions themselves responsible for actions and results, while establishing external monitoring processes; and (ii) the abdication of responsibility by public agencies regarding resolving the problem, which involves complex issues and demands new resource sources for HEIs. This implies the need to broaden the scope of financing for dropout combat actions, not limited to Pnaes's target audience, but expanding initiatives that allow HEIs to address other causes, such as those stemming from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which affect the broader student population of these institutions.

The dialectic between national and local actions corresponds to an important guiding thread for planning dropout combat initiatives. However, although the Brazilian state has incorporated this agenda in some historical actions, within the internal context of Ifes, this issue still represents a significant challenge in the institutions' daily operations. This presents a timely approach for further investigation on the topic, especially those exploring the link between university autonomy, public funding, and the state's responsibility in guaranteeing successful academic trajectories.

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Authors' Contributions

José da Silva Santos Junior - Data collection and analysis, text drafting.

Giselle Cristina Martins Real - Contribution to analyses and final version of the paper.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the article "The State in Action: Multidirectional Approaches to Combating Dropout in Higher Education."

Data availability

The data cannot be made publicly available because they contain personal information about the study participants, and their disclosure would violate established privacy and confidentiality standards. Therefore, the participants' real names have been removed and replaced with numbers

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