



PERCEPTIONS OF GUINEAN STUDENTS ON STUDENT ASSISTANCE POLICY AT UNILAB¹

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Abstract

This paper stems from a master's research that aimed to analyze the importance of the Student Assistance Program (PAES) actions in ensuring the permanence of Guinean students at UNILAB. We focus on the results obtained from field research based on a quantitative-qualitative methodological approach, with data collected through questionnaires applied via Google Forms. The instrument was directed to the total universe of 698 Guinean students enrolled in 2024, obtaining responses from 100 students. The results revealed that, although the PAES is relevant, it does not fully ensure student permanence, highlighting the need to improve UNILAB's student assistance policy, considering the recent approval of a regulation aiming to make it more effective and inclusive. The study contributes to the debate on the right to higher education and the importance of student assistance policies tailored to the needs of students in international cooperation contexts.

Keywords: Student assistance; International cooperation; Higher Education; School retention; Educational policy.

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PERCEPÇÕES DE ESTUDANTES GUINEENSES SOBRE POLÍTICA DE ASSISTÊNCIA ESTUDANTIL DA UNILAB

Resumo: Este artigo resulta de uma pesquisa de mestrado cujo objetivo geral foi analisar a importância das ações do Programa de Assistência ao Estudante (PAES) para a permanência de estudantes guineenses na UNILAB. Particularizamos os resultados obtidos em pesquisa de campo assentada em abordagem metodológica quanti-qualitativa, com dados obtidos através de questionários aplicados via *Google Forms*. O instrumento de coleta foi direcionado ao universo total de 698 estudantes guineenses matriculados em 2024, obtendo respostas de 100 estudantes. Os resultados revelaram que o PAES, embora relevante, não garante plenamente a permanência estudantil, destacando a necessidade de aprimorar a política de assistência estudantil da UNILAB, considerando a aprovação recente de uma portaria que visa torná-la mais eficaz e inclusiva. O estudo contribui para o debate sobre o direito à educação superior e a importância de políticas de assistência estudantil adequadas às necessidades dos estudantes em contextos de cooperação internacional.

Palavras-chave: Assistência estudantil; Cooperação internacional; Educação Superior; Permanência escolar; Política Educacional.

PERCEPCIONES DE LOS ESTUDIANTES GUINEANOS SOBRE LA POLÍTICA DE ASISTENCIA ESTUDIANTIL EN LA UNILAB

Resumen: Este artículo surge de una investigación de maestría que tuvo como objetivo general analizar la importancia de las acciones del Programa de Asistencia al Estudiante (PAES) en garantizar la permanencia de los estudiantes guineanos en la UNILAB. Se detallan los resultados obtenidos en una investigación de campo basada en un enfoque metodológico cuantitativo-cualitativo, con datos obtenidos a través de cuestionarios aplicados mediante *Google Forms*. El instrumento de recolección fue dirigido al universo total de 698 estudiantes guineanos matriculados en 2024, obteniendo respuestas de 100 estudiantes. Los resultados revelaron que, aunque el PAES es relevante, no garantiza plenamente la permanencia estudiantil, destacando la necesidad de mejorar la política de asistencia estudiantil de la UNILAB, considerando la aprobación reciente de una normativa que busca hacerla más eficaz e inclusiva. El estudio contribuye al debate sobre el derecho a la educación superior y la importancia de políticas de asistencia estudiantil adecuadas a las necesidades de los estudiantes en contextos de cooperación internacional.

Palabras clave: Asistencia estudiantil; Cooperación internacional; Educación Superior; Retención escolar; Política educacional.

Introdução

To learn in life, to learn together with our people, to learn in books and in the experience of others. To learn always. To think with our own heads, to walk on our own feet (Amílcar Cabral).

In an unequal and unjust society, marked by racism, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation, affirmative action is understood as a tool for historical reparation in the face of socially imposed obstacles on certain social groups. In this sense, we agree with Feres Júnior et al. (2018, p. 13), who define affirmative action as “...any program, public or private, that aims to grant special resources or rights to members of a disadvantaged social group, with a view to a collective good.” The author points out that these policies have as their main categories ethnic and racial issues, class, gender, and castes, which were subjugated and placed in a condition of exclusion. Therefore, affirmative actions involve “...political participation, access to education, admission to higher education institutions, health services, employment, business opportunities, material goods, social protection networks, and cultural and historical recognition” (Feres Júnior et al., 2018, p. 13).

It is from this understanding that we situate the defense of student assistance, considering it an essential element for the retention of students from popular classes, whose families have been historically excluded from access to the university. This group includes Black and Indigenous students, working-class people in general who attended elementary and high school in public schools, as well as those who migrate from their Global South countries to pursue higher education in Brazil. Therefore, the article in question is the result of master's research that had as its general objective to analyze the importance of the actions of the Student Assistance Program (PAES) in ensuring the retention of Guinean students at UNILAB.

We reflect on the weaknesses of the higher education system in Guinea-Bissau as a direct result of colonialism. According to Fanon (2022), colonial domination sought to suppress the culture of colonized peoples, imposing violence to ensure its supremacy and its ethical, moral, and cultural values. Mbembe (2018), in turn, points out that colonization represented the European claim to universal domination, associating populations and territories in an unprecedented way through the violence perpetrated by racism. Rocha (2024) highlights that Portuguese colonialism, initially sustained by the enslavement of Black bodies kidnapped from the African continent and focused especially on Brazil, began, after Brazilian independence and

the legitimization of the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), to exploit natural resources and subjugate Black populations in their own territories — violence experienced by Guinea-Bissau.

Education prior to colonization, based on the African oral tradition⁴, was altered by colonial education, which was restricted to the needs of the colonizing, violent, and racist State. Only in the mid-1970s, after the revolutionary process, did the country become independent and begin to build its education policy with a rights-based approach for the Guinean population. In this sense, higher education in the country is still recent and is in a process of construction, which leads many young people to seek universities in other countries, as is the case for Guinean students in Brazil. It is within this context that the importance of cooperation between Brazil and Guinea-Bissau in the field of higher education is inserted, materialized in the creation of the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB), as an experience of South-South Cooperation (Teixeira; Baticam, 2020).

The research also presents reflections on the student assistance policy in Brazil and its implementation at UNILAB, based on the understanding of Fernandes, Estrela, and Teixeira (2016), according to whom it consists of State actions aimed at overcoming inequalities in access, retention, and academic success, through social benefit programs and student support. For Assis et al. (2013, p. 128-129), student assistance “...is named 'policy' because it is structured based on a set of principles and guidelines that guide the implementation of actions in the field of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).”

This occurs from the perspective of social inclusion, expanded training, knowledge production, improvement of academic performance and quality of life, acting preventively in situations of academic failure and dropout, resulting from insufficient financial conditions (Fonaprace, 2012). By analyzing the historical trajectory of student assistance as a policy, one perceives a process of deviations until the legitimation of its programs, marked by a path full of challenges. Given Brazil's political, social, and economic circumstances, it is possible to understand student assistance under three distinct phases. The first phase covers an extensive period, from the creation of the first university until the beginning of political democratization. This phase is characterized by student assistance restricted to serving middle-class students,

⁴ The African oral tradition is a set of cultural practices that involve the transmission of knowledge, stories, myths, legends, teachings, wisdom, and values from generation to generation through speech. Instead of being recorded in writing, this tradition is passed down verbally, often by storytellers, elders, or wise people within a community. This type of tradition is very rich and varied throughout Africa, reflecting the continent's cultural diversity. Oral tradition includes not only narratives and stories but also poems, songs, proverbs, and rituals. Furthermore, it serves as a means of education, keeping alive the customs, history, and cultural identities of different African peoples.

who had access to higher education. From that moment on, a second phase begins, characterized by a favorable environment for debates and legislative proposals, which culminated in a new configuration of the student assistance policy in Brazilian universities. This phase occurred in a context of greater prominence for social policies, driven by the democratic opening. The third phase began with the implementation of the Program to Support Restructuring and Expansion Plans for Federal Universities (REUNI), in 2007, and extended to the present day (Kowalsky, 2012).

In the context of the research and, certainly, of the writing of this text, the institutionalization of the public policy of student assistance gained normative prominence with the publication of Normative Ordinance No. 39, of 2007, and, later, Decree No. 7,234, of 2010, which establishes the National Student Assistance Program (PNAES) (Brasil, 2007b, 2010a). In addition to these, we have Ordinance No. 389, of May 9, 2013 (Brasil, 2013), which creates the Student Retention Scholarship Program and, finally, Law No. 14,914, of July 3, 2024, which establishes the National Student Assistance Policy (PNAES) (Brasil, 2024). Specifically, the Student Assistance Program (PAES) of UNILAB, from 2017, and finally, during the final revision phase of the research, that is, in January 2025, the regulation of important changes to PAES-UNILAB occurred, which were approved by the *ad referendum* Consuni/UNILAB Resolution No. 144, of August 13, 2024, and consolidated as a norm through Ordinance No. 174, of January 15, 2025 (Brasil, 2025).

Through these normative frameworks, the research sought to understand the perception of Guinean students about the importance of student assistance for their retention at the university, reflections that will be presented in this article. The methodological approach for the empirical research was mixed-methods (quanti-qualitative), with data obtained through questionnaires applied to Guinean students⁵, via Google Forms, with closed and open-ended questions. The data collection instrument was directed to the total universe of 698 Guinean students enrolled in 2024. We obtained responses from 100 students, of whom 98 study on the Ceará campuses (63% Palmares, 34% Auroras, and 1% Liberdade) and 2% study on the Malês campus, in Bahia. In the first part of the text, we present information about the Student Retention Program – PAES of UNILAB, and in the second, we present the perception of Guinean students about the importance of UNILAB's student assistance, with quantitative

⁵ The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the State University of Londrina, and all students who participated in the research agreed to the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE).

information and qualitative analysis of the responses. We hope to bring reflections on student assistance, internationalizing the debate based on the cooperation experience proposed by UNILAB. We reinforce the importance of the Brazilian state, in addition to repairing the historical debt to African populations for university places, to promote robust policies capable of effectively ensuring student retention.

UNILAB STUDENT RETENTION PROGRAM

The University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony - UNILAB was created by Law No. 12,289, of July 20, 2010 (Brasil, 2010b), as the result of an international cooperation project situated within South-South relations. Its main mission is to internalize and internationalize higher education in Brazil and to promote integration among the member countries of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). It was created with the purpose of training professionals who can overcome the barriers imposed by colonialist ideologies, recovering histories that were silenced. Additionally, it seeks to consolidate itself as a university that critically challenges colonialism and reflects on its influences and continuities over time.

It began its activities on May 25, 2011⁶, on the Liberdade campus, in the city of Redenção, in the state of Ceará. It is currently composed of four campuses: two located in Redenção, Ceará, where the administrative headquarters is, and the others in Acarape, Ceará, and São Francisco do Conde, Bahia. The university offers a wide range of undergraduate courses, both in-person and distance learning, in addition to *lato sensu* (distance specialization) and *stricto sensu* (master's) graduate programs distributed among different academic institutes. The courses encompass all areas of knowledge, divided into bachelor's and licentiate degrees.

In 2024, UNILAB had 4,680 students, distributed across various countries. Of the total, Brazil holds the largest portion, with 3,162 students, followed by Guinea-Bissau, with 696, and Angola, with 521. Other participating countries in the academic context included Mozambique, with 235 students, São Tomé and Príncipe, with 47, Cape Verde, with only 5 students, and Timor-Leste, with 14. The UNILAB Student Assistance Program⁷ (PAES-UNILAB) is

⁶ The date for the start of activities was included in a duly considered context: May 25 is Africa Day, a date that commemorates the founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (UNILAB, 2013, p. 36).

⁷ The institutional program followed the guidelines established in the National Student Assistance Program set forth in Decree No. 7,234, of July 19, 2010.

administered and executed by the Pro-Rectorry of Affirmative and Student Policies (PROP AE) within the scope of the Student Policies Coordination (COEST), created during the administration of former rector Nilma Lino Gomes⁸.

Until December 2024, the period in which the field research was carried out, the objective of this program was to facilitate access to student assistance rights through institutional support and to ensure the retention of students enrolled in in-person undergraduate courses at UNILAB, whose socioeconomic conditions are insufficient for retention at the university. It offered six modalities: housing assistance; installation assistance; transport assistance; food assistance; social assistance; and emergency assistance. Student entry into the Student Assistance Program was done through a selective process publicized in a specific public notice, available on the institution's website. The Student Retention Selection and Monitoring Committee (COSAPE) is composed of social workers who perform the socioeconomic evaluations. For the socioeconomic evaluation of the candidates for the PAES, social and economic criteria are used.

The socioeconomic profile was analyzed based on a set of indicators so that the combination of these would point to the degree of social vulnerability based on the following specific indicators. The duration of the assistance was a maximum of 24 months, as specified in the public notice, renewable (except for the installation assistance), if compliance with the criteria required in the public notice was proven. The process of renewing the grant of assistance was conditioned on a new socioeconomic evaluation without a guarantee of approval (Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira, 2017).

Regarding UNILAB's adherence to and implementation of the National Student Retention Scholarship Program, which is open for public selection for scholarships worth R\$1,400.00 (one thousand four hundred reais), this program is specifically aimed at students who prove to be Indigenous or *quilombola*, having their ethnic belonging recognized by their leaders. That is to say, even though the national program states that the scholarship should be offered preferably to Indigenous and *quilombola* students, UNILAB excludes African students from its public notice.

Perhaps readers may have found it strange that all the information above was in the past tense. The reason for this is that during the final revision phase of the research, that is, in January

⁸ Nilma Lino Gomes served as rector of UNILAB between 2013 and 2014. An intellectual, activist, and militant of the Black Movement, she was the first Black woman to hold the position of rector at a federal public university.

2025, the regulation of changes to PAES-UNILAB occurred, as mentioned in the introduction, which were approved by Ordinance No. 174, of January 15, 2025. The new regulation is in consonance with the National Student Assistance Policy approved in 2024, an important achievement in the struggle for the right to public, free, and quality education. The Ordinance indicates that the Student Assistance Program (PAES) aims to enable access to student assistance rights, promoting conditions so that in-person undergraduate students in a situation of socioeconomic vulnerability can successfully remain in the academic environment.

It commits to strengthening institutional policies focused on social inclusion and equal opportunities in education; promoting the democratization of retention in public higher education; reducing social inequalities in diverse contexts; decreasing retention and dropout rates due to financial difficulties; stimulating the comprehensive development of students; and implementing financial aid, as the budget allows, to support academic success and the completion of undergraduate courses.

The beneficiaries are, preferentially, students from the public basic education network and/or with a family income per capita of up to one minimum wage. Students in in-person undergraduate courses, who are regularly enrolled and who meet the requirements of the regular or continuous-flow public notice, can compete for the assistance. Regarding the modalities of assistance that will be applied starting in the year 2025, the Ordinance defines that they must address different levels of socioeconomic vulnerability and specific needs, expanding the modalities of assistance: Retention Assistance - Level I; Retention Assistance - Level II; Retention Assistance - Level III; Retention Assistance - Level IV; Retention Assistance - Level V; Emergency Assistance; Student Mother/Father Assistance; New Student Assistance; Digital Inclusion Assistance (Brasil, 2025).

Under the new policy, some types of assistance may be accumulated, provided that specific criteria established in the public notices are met. The program's funds will come from the budget of the National Student Assistance Policy (PNAES) and other sources, however, the grants depend on budgetary availability. We reinforce that at the time of the field research, this Ordinance had not yet been approved. Therefore, the responses of the Guinean students that will be presented in the next section refer to the structure of PAES-UNILAB in effect until December 2024, as will be seen below.

PERCEPTION OF GUINEAN STUDENTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF UNILAB'S STUDENT ASSISTANCE

We will present an analysis of the importance of UNILAB's student assistance policy based on the perceptions of Guinean students, using data collected from the field research. By analyzing the collected data, we present the participants' accounts regarding the relevance of the Student Assistance Program (PAES) and how the program has contributed to their retention at UNILAB. We will address how the students evaluate the positive aspects of the policy, as well as the critiques they presented and the challenges they experienced.

ARRIVAL AT UNILAB AND CHALLENGES FOR RETENTION

The majority of the students who participated in the research come from low-income families, which experience financial difficulties. When questioned about their previous academic life, the majority studied in public schools, accounting for 65.6% compared to 35.4% of those who studied in private schools. When asked if they were already aware of the Student Assistance Program (PAES) before enrolling at UNILAB, 68 students responded that they knew about the program's existence through colleagues who studied at UNILAB, 31 students stated that they were not aware, and 1 student did not respond. The students who were aware of the existence of the Student Assistance Program reported that it was one of the reasons that led them to choose UNILAB, since their families, especially their parents, do not have the financial means to afford their studies. According to these accounts:

Yes, because it is one of the reasons that motivated my coming here, my parents do not have the means to make my dream a reality.

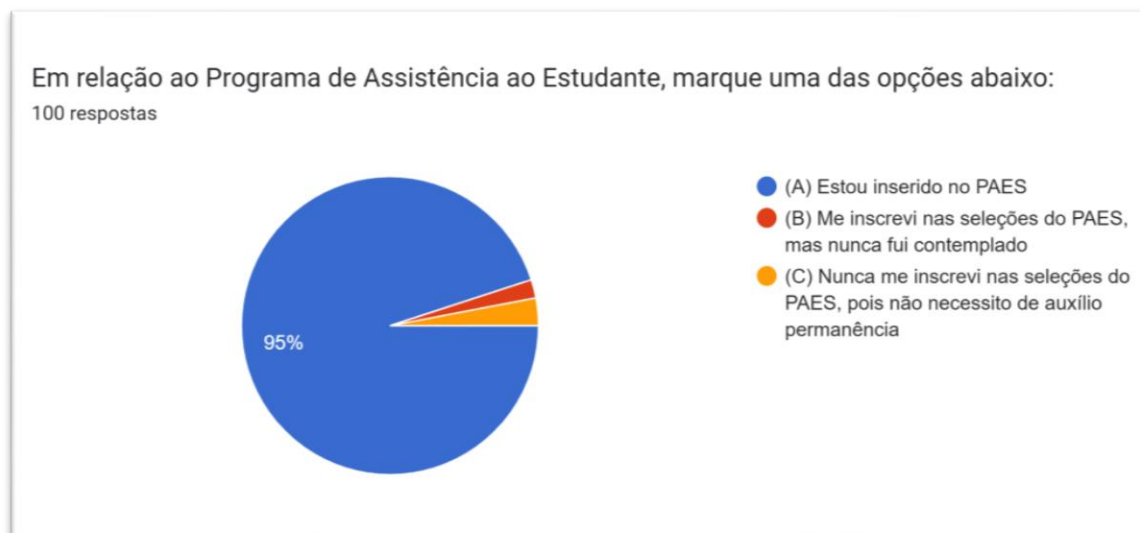
Yes, because I had some colleagues who were studying at UNILAB, so, before I enrolled, I asked them how they support themselves here. Because, I could not enroll abroad without having someone to support me there, as I already knew that my family's financial situation would not work out to support me abroad. Therefore, when I found out that there was student assistance, I took the opportunity to enter higher education here in Brazil.

Yes, I knew, for that reason I chose UNILAB.

With regard to the Student Assistance Program, 95% are enrolled in the program, 2% applied but were never granted assistance, and 3% never applied for the PAES selections

because they do not need retention assistance, as can be seen below,

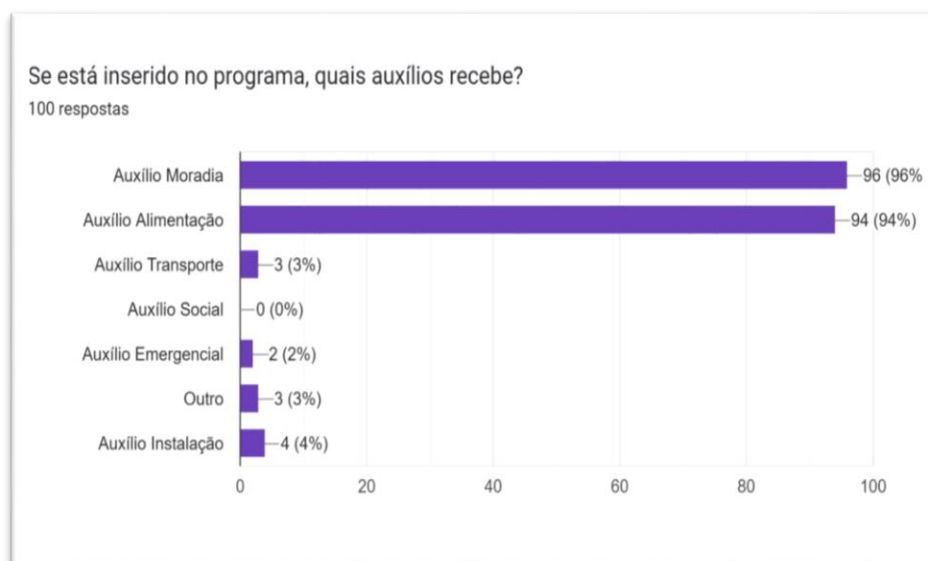
Graph 1 – Student inclusion in the student assistance program



Source: Based on survey data.

These data evidence that the majority of these students receive student assistance, which confirms the description of their family reality, as many do not receive financial support from their families. We see that almost all the students enrolled in the program receive housing and food assistance. These results can be explained by the concentration of students in the surrounding areas of Redenção and Acarape, thus, they depend more on housing and food assistance, to the detriment of other types of assistance. The distribution shows that 96% receive housing assistance, 94% food assistance, 4% installation assistance, 3% transport assistance, 2% emergency assistance, and none of them receive Social assistance.

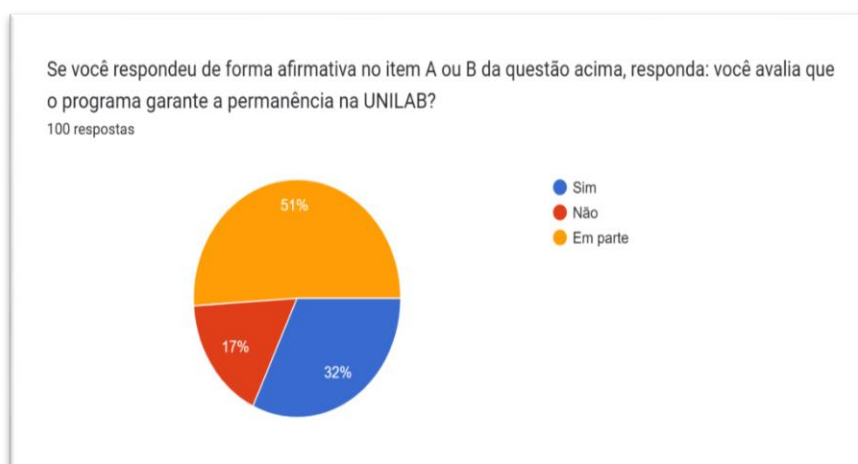
Graph 2 – Aid received by students



Source: Based on survey data.

On the other hand, for the 5% of students who are not enrolled in the PAES (see Graph 1), a question was posed regarding their reason for not being included in the program and how they have managed to remain at the university. The responses were varied. To evaluate the effectiveness of the PAES, respondents were asked if the program ensures their retention at UNILAB, and the results presented a diverse picture of responses. The majority, however, believes that the PAES makes a significant contribution, although it does not guarantee student retention by itself.

Graph 3 – Evaluation of the Student Assistance Program



Source: Based on survey data.

As can be seen in Graph 3, 32% of respondents believe the program ensures the permanence of students at UNILAB, 17% disagree that the program ensures permanence, while 51% consider the effectiveness to be partially achieved. For the latter, the assistance received, by itself, does not fully ensure the student's permanence at UNILAB, although it weighs significantly on their decisions. According to those who agree with PAES's effectiveness, the assistance they receive is fundamental to their success at UNILAB. As one student pointed out:

Without this student assistance program, many Guinean students would not have a way to continue their studies. Because, Redenção and Acarape do not have places where students can find employment to work and pay their bills. Therefore, the PAES is of great importance for student retention.

Another adds that,

The PAES helps us remain at the university because many international students come from their home countries without having sufficient means to cover their expenses and other charges during their undergraduate course.

Two students were emphatic in evaluating that the PAES is able to achieve its objectives: “yes, because I am here thanks to this program, but with many unquenchable needs,” and the other response points out that “yes, the program is able to achieve its objectives, because it meets needs, ensuring that all students, especially the most vulnerable, have the necessary resources to be able to remain at the university.” Students who evaluate that the program partially meets its objectives go on to state that “in certain ways, it is not able to achieve this objective, but it helps with retention.” This other one states that “in parts, yes, but with much sacrifice and renunciation, even of basic things on the part of the students, to manage the expenses.” The majority showed that the program contributes to their retention at the university, but they lament the amount allocated to students when they consider the current situation of the real estate market. For example, this respondent pointed out that,

The Baturité Massif has been very expensive, both for rent and food, [...] one moment you worry about how to pay the rent, another moment you worry about how to eat well. Because, now, the lowest rental values are R\$ 350.00, for a one-bedroom house, which does not make it easy.

Another student confirms by pointing out that the “assistance helps only in part, because as soon as the income comes in, the assistance almost runs out, and with that the student runs the risk of getting into debt.” The issue of debt and loans is reinforced by this student:

In general, it does not cover monthly expenses; sometimes, one needs to resort to a loan, because the student assistance policy does not keep up with the local reality. With only the PAES assistance, it is not possible to have a stable financial life, as students are not able to meet their needs, which leads them to get into debt.

Under the same concern, another respondent describes that it is difficult to remain at UNILAB without student assistance, as the worry about the financial situation ends up being a demotivating factor: “retention depends a lot on your effort, and now, even before finishing your course, they already want to cut them, and that makes us feel demotivated. Without retention, how can I remain at the university?!” he asked.

Another student emphasizes that, “the program is not able to respond to even half of what it should respond to.” This participant adds: “no, for now it is very far from achieving the established objectives, unless there were changes in this area.” This insufficiency of the assistance amount demonstrates a disregard by the higher education policy in ensuring retention, as the value of R\$ 530.00 was fixed since the first year of UNILAB's operation, in 2011, which at the time was enough for students to pay their bills. As the following respondent points out:

The student assistance program was conceived and created to ensure student retention, but, today, it is no longer able to effectively ensure retention, given that this value corresponded or was enough for retention. Over the years, the city has grown, rents and the prices of products in supermarkets are very high, due to inflation, the increase in taxes, and other problems that affect Brazil. This makes it difficult for students to remain, leading some to live 3 or 4 to a house in order to support themselves.

Still on the insufficiency of the amount, the following student agrees with the difficulty of living on the assistance amount, stating that it is little when considering the students' monthly expenses, given that since UNILAB's founding, they continue to receive R\$ 530.00:

[...] after 14 years (more than a decade) of its existence, students continue to receive assistance in a miserable amount, which is not even enough to meet basic needs such as: breakfast, etc. Although the UNILAB cafeteria provides lunch and dinner, that is not enough.

The statement denotes concern for the health and food insufficiency of these students, revealing a situation of precarity and financial limitations in which these students find themselves and which directly impact their health and well-being. This appears to be one of the

greatest concerns of the students, reflecting the scarcity of resources to sustain a regular and balanced diet, having to eat only twice a day, as this student shows:

Can you imagine how difficult it is to support yourself with this amount without family support?! A person becomes traumatized. In addition, we eat only twice a day, at 11 am and 5 pm, until the next day. With R\$ 530.00, students are not able to eat well, products are very expensive in the markets.

For students with difficulties adapting to the food served at the University Restaurant (RU), the situation can be worse, as the assistance amount is not enough to buy the necessary amount of food to prepare at home:

It's not enough to feed us. Sometimes, the food at the RU does not sit well, and a person doesn't even have R\$ 1 to buy another meal. The dinner time is very early, and we are left without food until 11 am the next day. This assistance doesn't even come close to paying the house bill and making up for the food costs.

The assistance amount and the financial difficulties are seen by 2 students as one of the main reasons for student transfers to other federal universities in cities that offer greater opportunities. For example, this respondent confirmed that “the assistance amount, now, is little to cover the cities of Acarape and Redenção, one of the reasons for students' moves to the state of Santa Catarina [...]”. The same conclusion is made by another student, reinforcing that the financial difficulty due to the assistance,

has been making it very difficult for students to remain at the university. [...] the rent is very expensive, which often makes it difficult for many to remain here, others look for an exit in other states that better meet their demands.

The focus of this study is on understanding the student assistance policy as a mechanism to ensure the retention of students at UNILAB. In this context, the participants of this research were asked if the PAES ensures their retention at the university. Two students disagree and confirm that “many students need family support to sustain themselves” and that “many times, the student has to contact their parents in order to contribute to their retention, especially concerning food and health.”

Others point out that the PAES, by itself, does not ensure retention, as it also depends on the commitment of the student, who should not fail due to absences. Others criticize the lack of willingness of the professionals who administer the PAES, saying that,

[...] many people end up losing assistance due to a small flaw that a simple alert message could resolve. Therefore, we can see that the institution does not make an effort to guide students regarding the renewal process.

The response of another student reinforces this concern with the application and request process for student assistance at UNILAB:

The assistance request process is not a facilitator. The institution does not notify students about pending documents, resulting in automatic disqualifications, even when the student is approved but failed to attach a certain document, such as the commitment term. This lack of communication and transparency harms the students, who are often unjustly disqualified, without the opportunity to correct the errors or provide the necessary documents.

Despite everything, the students expressed expectations for an increase in the assistance amount, demonstrating hope for a better future with the following comments: “We hope that everything changes as quickly as possible!” “UNILAB must sit down and rethink this situation, because it is urgent and necessary!” And “things are not easy for us here at UNILAB!” “I hope that the research will help in increasing the assistance amount!”

One of the concerns of this research has to do with the effectiveness of student assistance policies, which is not limited only to the financial issue. In this sense, the perception of students about the health assistance provided to them at UNILAB was verified, and the highlighted results show a quality evaluation ranging from reasonable to poor.

Graph 4 – Assessment of student health care



Source: Based on survey data.

As shown, it is evident that although some students (14.4% and 3.3%) consider the student health assistance service to be good or very good, respectively, the majority believes it falls into the categories of reasonable and poor, corresponding to 44.4% and 22.2% respectively. These results show that although the service is relevant from the students' point of view, they also perceive the challenges that plague health assistance at UNILAB. For the first group (good and very good), the responses show the reasons for their rating. For example, this student states that the professionals who manage and provide health assistance services at UNILAB "provide great service, are willing to help, and give you support." While another states that,

Without this service, students would not have the means to undergo some treatments at private clinics. Because, we have seen several referrals of students for treatment in other places through this service, which would be expensive if they were not referred by this service.

However, for the majority, who classified the service as reasonable or poor, there are still significant challenges for the UNILAB health assistance service to achieve the desired quality. This respondent, for example, shows the issue of the program's follow-up with the student: "it's reasonable, because there is no follow-up for sick students, [...] and according to them, UNILAB has not provided assistance as expected. "The concern with the size of the service team in relation to the number of students who need the service also constitutes the

concern of another student: "with the high number of UNILAB students, that service is not sufficient for everyone [...]." The situation is described even better by another respondent, who pointed out the following:

The student health assistance service has enormous challenges, especially for international students. The services provided by the Center for Comprehensive Health Care (CAIS) are not able to immediately address each student's health problems because they offer specialized outpatient care in a limited way, have the Special Immunization Room, Breastfeeding Support Room, and Welcoming Room. It is perceptible that, due to the high health risks for the student, UNILAB's health service has not been able to assist them and solve the problems as soon as possible because of the limitations of services and health technicians. One issue that is still a great challenge is the small number of health technicians, doctors, and nurses that the program has. It should be noted that the service at the health posts of Acarape and Redenção is very difficult for international students, as they face great problems, such as discrimination, racism in care, or during diagnosis with the doctor.

Other students agree with this statement and consider the health assistance at UNILAB to be poor insofar as they point out that "the health assistance offered by UNILAB is very bad, as we saw many cases of deaths that happened, which the university did not attend to out of ignorance." Another respondent refers to the need to resort to the Unified Health System (SUS),

I say it's poor because for many students with serious health problems, UNILAB doesn't even help with the treatment. Sometimes, we have to wait in the SUS line, which takes a long time to call you, so the student has to go to private clinics to get treatment as soon as possible. Sometimes, there is no money, you have to borrow on a credit card, because the SUS takes a very long time.

In addition to these points, when students talk about the health centers in the cities of Redenção and Acarape, they show concern about the way they are attended to:

Xenophobia and racism are experienced every day in health centers and free medicine distribution networks; an African student and Black person can hardly get medicine there. At least I, without money to buy medicine, went there several times, and not once did I get the medicine. And, one day, I went with a colleague who has now moved to the Federal University of Santa Catarina, and they told us that the medicine we wanted, we could not receive because only a small amount was left.

For some, these situations would be minimized with a well-functioning student health assistance service at UNILAB. Thus, the students appeal for UNILAB to have a university hospital to serve its public:

UNILAB needs to have a university hospital, because many students have health problems and are not able to get treatment at public hospitals, because it takes a very long time to be attended to (which doesn't even happen) and, for these and other reasons, it would be very important to have a hospital at the university.

The lack of adequate care that can solve students' problems was also pointed out as one of the factors for students' transfers to other federal universities, mainly the Federal University of Santa Catarina.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND MOTHERHOOD

This study also sought to identify the percentage of students who receive some form of scholarship, such as the Programa Residência Pedagógica (PRP), Programa Institucional de Bolsa de Iniciação à Docência (PIBID), Programa Bolsa Monitoria (PMB), Programa Institucional de Bolsa Iniciação Científica (PIBIC), Fundação Cearense de Apoio ao Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (FUNCAP), Programa de Educação Tutorial (PET), Programa de Bolsa de Extensão Arte e Cultura (PIBEAC), among others. The results showed that only 19% of the students who participated in this research receive a scholarship, varying between R500.00 and R700.00, compared to 81% who do not.

It is important to highlight that 97% of the students who participated in this research do not work, while 3% do, with a monthly income varying between 1 and 2 minimum wages. This is due to the insufficiency of scholarships and the absence of financial help from families, as this student describes: "many students feel vulnerable and end up needing financial help or working part-time jobs, which can affect their academic performance." This respondent adds that this situation "ends up making it difficult to remain, leading some students to look for other sources of income, running the risk of having this assistance cut off."

In other words, paid work is the way they have found to support themselves: "my period of assistance has ended. To support myself here, I receive family help and also work." This situation is described by another student who does not face the same challenge but observes the reality of their colleagues:

I know students who were not granted PAES assistance due to errors or failures in submitting documents. They go to the capital, Fortaleza, to work so they can remain and continue their studies. There are others who receive

support from their family members who are in Guinea-Bissau or in other countries.

Another indicator that aids in reflections on academic performance concerns the issue of motherhood. As previously indicated, the majority of students who are mothers do not have access to a daycare for their children. When asked how they manage to balance motherhood with their studies, only **11** students responded that they are mothers and face difficulties in balancing their lives as mothers and as students, in addition to indicating the insufficiency of the student assistance amount. As can be seen in the response of one of them:

It really is difficult, but as it is a challenge for me, I make an effort to make everything work. On the other hand, it becomes more challenging when you are a single mother, without a partner to support you. But one important thing in all this is food; it is often very difficult to survive on R\$530.00. Sometimes we end up giving priority to the child and leaving our stomach empty.

Another states that "in reality, it becomes more tiring to take care of the child and worry about your studies" and that "this is very complicated, studying and taking care of the child at the same time." On the other hand, a student with a partner is able to better reconcile motherhood with studies, as another respondent points out: "[...] thank God, I have the father of my child in my undergraduate program, which has helped me a lot in my studies."

Also regarding motherhood, respondents report investing financial resources to pay someone to take care of their children: "it's not easy at all, but we pay another person to help us take care of the child." "I leave her with a lady I pay to take care of her during the times I am in class." Another considers that "[...] it is a difficult task, especially when you don't have someone by your side who supports you with the child and also financially." While another respondent confirms that "Although it is not easy to be a mother and simultaneously a student, knowing that there is no daycare for children—that is, full-time daycare—as in my case without assistance, since my period of assistance has expired, it is being very challenging."

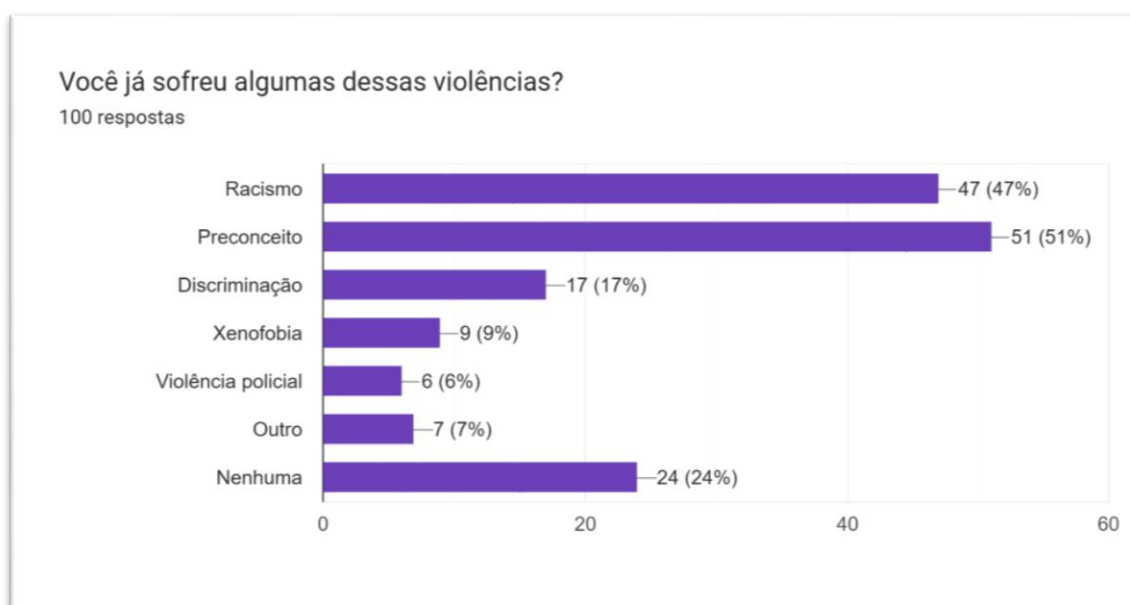
These statements show that the issue of access to daycare is also one of the factors that make it difficult for mothers to reconcile motherhood with their studies. Even for those whose children are not in Brazil, homesickness ends up hindering their focus on studies, as one of the respondents shows:

Taking into account that my child is not here with me, I consider that I am consolidating my studies and motherhood well, but the homesickness for my

child because of the distance sometimes hinders my performance a lot, generating feelings of sadness and stress.

It is evident that financial difficulties and the challenges of balancing motherhood and academic performance are elements that interfere with the mental health of the students. Therefore, it is important to mediate between the satisfaction of material needs and access to basic social rights such as food security and health. Another point raised and already demonstrated above refers to the participants' accounts of violence expressed through racism and xenophobia when they resort to health policy in Brazil. In the questionnaire, there was a direct question asking if they had ever suffered any violence in Brazil, and the answers confirmed that there is an environment of hostility toward students from Guinea-Bissau, according to the chart below,

Graph 5 – If the student has ever suffered any violence in Brazil



Source: Based on survey data

The data presented reveal that the majority of participants have already experienced some form of violence, indicating that only a small portion, 24%, stated they had not been a victim of any violence. Prejudice (51%) and racism (47%) appear as the most recurrent forms of violence reported, followed by discrimination (17%) and xenophobia (9%). Although in smaller percentages, police violence (6%) and other types of violence (7%) were also mentioned, which demonstrates the breadth and diversity of the experiences of oppression faced

by the participants. These data suggest the persistence of contexts of exclusion and social inequality, as well as the need for strategies to combat these forms of violence and promote more inclusive and respectful environments.

UNILAB, being a university that by its nature promotes integration between CPLP countries, the study considered it important to analyze how students evaluate integration within their academic space. Thus, 19.4% point to the evident existence of integration among students of different nationalities, 24.5% did not perceive integration, while 56.1% believe that integration exists in part; that is, it does not reach an expected level, but it is also perceptible in academic spaces. According to this reflection,

UNILAB provides integration among students from different realities, whether of African, Brazilian, or Asian origin, that is, member countries of the CPLP. These 7 countries that make up UNILAB demonstrate their cultural realities, customs, habits, and performances. With this, it helps the university provide an environment of great social interaction and educational charisma. Although, integration also brings some challenges in the implementation of the student assistance program and in combating discrimination, prejudice, xenophobia, racism, and other phenomena that are putting the lives of international students at risk, due to a wide range of prejudices in the region where UNILAB is located.

Another interesting account points to the existence of integration:

Integration exists at UNILAB, it is easy to see this in the relationships among international and national students, between administrative staff, faculty, and students. But, this has to be worked on every day so that it can continue to yield more fruits and values for our societies and the world. Therefore, the world needs this type of integration that happens at UNILAB. Perhaps, in the future, this idea of UNILAB can inspire other countries in the world to do as Brazil does.

There are students who disagree with this position and state that,

Even among the faculty, there is no integration, imagine among us students. There is no integration, there is only the name, because the students and professors themselves create divisions, and each one seeks to get close to their acquaintances.

The administration is not able to promote integration, nor do students in the classrooms have affection for each other, which is one of the fundamental elements in promoting integration.

It's just a way to embellish the university, but deep down, we don't end up seeing that on a daily basis.

On the other hand, even with the objective response that integration exists, the respondents brought up some issues similar to the answers of those who consider that integration exists in part or not at all. Two examples:

There is, yes, integration, but it is a bit complicated to explain, as there are moments when you feel like questioning this situation, especially in the university restaurants and classrooms, where a certain group of students stays on one side and other groups on the other, making it seem that we are not at a university of integration.

This point of view is contradicted by other students who were outraged by the segregation in a space that promotes integration, as can be seen in their response:

As for integration, it is a facade; one has to be bold to say that it does not exist, because you clearly see the separation of students in the University Restaurant, on the buses, in the cafeteria, and in the classrooms—a group of Guineans, of Angolans, Brazilians, Mozambicans, among other nationalities.

In the class, the Africans sit on one side and the Brazilians on the other, the same thing happens among Africans from different countries. The institutional policies of integration such as the festival of cultures, the celebration of Africa Day, etc., are not able to handle the human complexity of the differences that make up the UNILAB university community. But, the internal squabbles, whose origins are, for the most part, partisan and polarized to extremes, such as left or right, in recent years, Bolsonaro and Lula, are ending the affective vitality of this university.

The responses present critiques and refer to a certain idealization of what integration should be, because for the participants, the persistence of political and cultural differences indicates the absence of integration. This type of perception also appears among those who consider that integration is partially achieved,

In parts, because there have been failed attempts, but there are still differences or difficulties that prevent this from happening. In different areas, it is possible to verify this consolidation. An example of this is in the arts and culture where extreme ideologies and politics are not welcome. But, yes, representativeness, exchange, contemplation, and the tasting of the various forms of living or of life's manifestation are. There, you can see integration, in the Angolan theater plays about 'Alambamento,' in the dances of São Tomé and Príncipe, and among other cultural groups that perform at the university. There, it is possible to integrate, because you don't need to understand the other's language to like the rhythm, you don't need to be Angolan to like 'Funge,' you don't need to be Guinean to love 'Caldo de Mancarra.' In fact, if the PAES benefits had covered my expenses, I would eat 'Caldo de Mancarra'—which translates to Peanut Broth—every day.

The account above presents an optimistic reading about the exchanges and is interesting because it mentions that if the PAES were sufficient for their needs, they would eat Guinean food every day. On the other hand, some responses present that there is a divide between international and national students, bringing up immensely worrying elements,

In some aspects, integration exists, but the majority appear separated. I believe it must be due to: behavioral, cultural, and even customs barriers. There is no major plan to promote an clarification of the variations between international and national students, creating a policy of interaction between them!

These divisions interfere with student retention, as they apparently reverberate xenophobia and racism, as the following account states, "with some professors, yes, and with students there is integration, but with some, we pay for it with our skin for being Black or an international student." Other accounts show that even in performing group work in class, the division reverberates,

I answered in part, because once in a while, there are some gestures that demonstrate integration, but in many cases, you don't see integration. This is verified when group work is requested, especially in the first semester. In group work, the Brazilians form groups among themselves, and the African students form groups among themselves.

In particular, many students do group work with their compatriots, without considering that we are in a university of integration. It's complicated to talk about integration in its totality here at UNILAB, which is why I say in parts, as certain people make the effort to integrate, but others do not. An example: it is difficult to see Brazilians mixing with Africans, both in the classroom and in the RU... so how can there be integration?!

UNILAB does its part by organizing activities, but many don't even like to go to these activities. There is still a perceptible division between African and Brazilian students in academic and social activities. The African students usually do their activities alone, while many Brazilians show no interest in participating in the events organized by the Africans. This segregation is also evident in the classroom and in the University Restaurant (RU), where groups tend to stay separate.

A discussion about gender issues also arose, regarding the participation of international, *quilombola*, and indigenous students in extension and scientific initiation projects, when the respondent states that,

To talk about integration in the university environment is to talk about the free

participation of everyone in the educational process. But that is not what happens. The participation of students in extension scholarship programs, scientific initiation projects, cultural presentations, classroom evaluations, among other things, is unfair and, therefore, selective, alienating a group, a race, a community. At UNILAB, there is little participation of women, international students, quilombolas, and indigenous people in research projects and similar programs. So, what exists at UNILAB is the fantasy of integration. There is a disparity in this matter of integration, because in my view, each student seeks to stay close to their compatriots, so this story of integration does not exist, much less on the part of the "owners of the land" who are very racist and prejudiced.

It is clear that racism and prejudice also make integration difficult, according to these statements:

There is a lot of practice of institutional racism. It is noticeable that racism and prejudice are very present in this university, from the administration to the students.

It's not possible to say that integration exists at UNILAB; in part, yes, but the exclusion and acts of racism within this university are visible.

In addition to the issue of integration, students lament that the university does not celebrate Africa Day⁹ and the independence dates of UNILAB's partner countries; only the African students celebrate them. For example, regarding Africa Day, this respondent pointed out that "It is only celebrated by the Africans, and the university does not release students to take part. That is, in activities related to Africa, only Africans will participate, and they are not always released from classes to be a part of it."

Similarly, regarding the celebration of the independence dates of the partner countries, this student describes that,

UNILAB is a very diverse university, but it is noticeable that there is no honor for the independence dates of the countries that make up UNILAB. It is possible to see on the independence dates of one of these countries that professors give students absences while they participate in the activities. It is sad, because the students do not have a voice to complain!

⁹ Africa Day is celebrated on May 25th and marks the founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The date symbolizes the struggle for independence of African countries and the unity of the continent. Currently, the OAU has been replaced by the African Union (AU), but Africa Day continues to be celebrated in several countries with cultural events, debates, and celebrations about the history and challenges of the African continent.

The students also highlighted that integration should not be limited only to relationships between people, but should also encompass the curricula of the courses, since in some areas they do not study content related to UNILAB's partner countries. Despite everything that was addressed, two students recognized UNILAB's contribution to the partner countries, especially to Guinea-Bissau:

[...] it is one of the federal universities that brings many Guinean students to Brazil, despite the difficulties found here, but it trains many Guinean intellectuals.

In these 14 years, UNILAB has already graduated many students from Guinea-Bissau in various areas who are today making their contributions.

Finally, the students also point out the need for improvement so that UNILAB can achieve desirable levels as a whole, indicating some points: "Student assistance, health, and problems with a lack of professors in some courses, Nursing, Social Work," thus improving the condition of the students. They also reinforce that the issue of integration needs to be analyzed and that strategies for improvement are necessary.

Final Considerations

By presenting the perceptions of Guinean students on the actions of the Student Assistance Program (PAES) in ensuring retention at UNILAB, we have provided important information that highlights the challenges to its effectiveness. On the other hand, analyzing the research data showed that, although the PAES does not fully meet the students' needs for retention at the university, it plays a relevant role by partially guaranteeing these conditions and contributing to the academic success of the beneficiaries. The results also indicate that the PAES has a significant impact on reducing the socioeconomic inequalities of the Guinean students through the granting of different types of assistance.

Other relevant reflections raised by the participants are related to health assistance and the insufficiency of the assistance amounts, issues that have encouraged the transfer of international students to other federal universities, especially the Federal University of Santa Catarina. Regarding the implementation of integration, students reported that it exists, but the majority argued that UNILAB is unable to promote it effectively and that, in practice, integration still remains in the ideal realm without being reflected in daily life. In addition, they

presented sensitive elements regarding racism, prejudice, and xenophobia, which are acts of violence that hinder integration.

In other words, the research concluded that the Brazilian State is still very far from ensuring student assistance capable of guaranteeing the effective retention of Guinean students. Thus, it would also be interesting for the Dean's Office of Affirmative and Student Policies (PROP AE) to seek ways to improve its internal student assistance policy, especially in promoting anti-racist actions and in defense of human rights that can generate welcoming processes at the university and break with the racist and xenophobic violence reported by the students. On the other hand, we conclude this article in a context of optimism, as, as already mentioned, the university approved, in January 2025, an Ordinance that improves and reforms its policy with the objective of making it more effective and inclusive, meeting several elements raised by the students.

We conclude these considerations by returning to the phrase of the Guinean revolutionary Amílcar Cabral, placed as the epigraph of this article. According to him, the end of colonialism will only be complete when we are capable of “thinking with our own heads, walking with our own feet.” In this sense, the claim for historical reparation—whether through international cooperation, access to the university, or student assistance—is part of the set of affirmative actions that not only correct past inequalities but also reaffirm the right to retention and dignity in the present.

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