


From choice to satisfaction: Higher Education and ProUni and non-ProUni graduates

Da escolha à satisfação: Educação Superior e egressos ProUni e não ProUni

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a survey conducted with graduates from five Brazilian non-profit higher education institutions. The aim was to identify aspects that influenced their choice of course, as well as their satisfaction with the education they received, among others. Using a quantitative approach, the survey included 1,145 responses, which were analyzed by comparing the responses of ProUni scholarship holders and non-scholarship holders. The results indicate that these graduates have been able to enter the job market for both groups, but mainly for those who received the ProUni scholarship, which is responsible for their access to and subsequent graduation. This highlights the importance of educational policies and how much ProUni has done for students from disadvantaged groups at the beginning.

Keywords: Higher Education; graduates; course choice; ProUni.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta o resultado de uma pesquisa realizada com egressos de cinco instituições de Educação Superior comunitárias brasileiras. Objetivou-se identificar aspectos que influenciaram na escolha do curso, bem como a satisfação com a formação conquistada, entre outros. De abordagem quantitativa, a pesquisa contou com 1.145 respostas cuja análise foi realizada comparando as respostas entre bolsistas ProUni e não bolsistas. Os resultados apontam a inserção profissional desses egressos para ambos os grupos, mas principalmente para aqueles que tiveram a bolsa ProUni, sendo ela responsável pelo acesso e consequente graduação. Isso destaca a importância de políticas educacionais e de quanto o ProUni tem feito para estudantes oriundos de grupos em desvantagens iniciais.

Palavras-chave: Educação Superior; egressos; escolha do curso; ProUni.

INTRODUCTION

Much of humanity is immersed in technology, whether on a smaller or larger scale depending on the context in which it is positioned. Digital technology is part of everyday life, and educational processes cannot lose sight of the need to educate differently. Fava (2016) says that educational institutions need not only to adapt to the new profile of students but also to adapt their physical spaces and reevaluate teacher training. Formal education must remain indispensable, and this includes higher education.

However, historically, access to higher education in Brazil has not been and still is not for everyone. Initial characteristics, such as race, gender, disabilities, age, family, or socioeconomic status, which are independent of a person's wishes, are aspects that often hinder access to higher education (Roemer, 1998; Felicetti; Cabrera, 2018). In addition to the above-mentioned characteristics being barriers to access, there are selection processes that separate those who can enter from those who cannot for various reasons, including

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Data availability: Research data are not available.

Study conducted at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil.



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preparation to compete for places at free higher education institutions or those with tuition fees. To this end, public policies aimed at reversing the historical trends that have disadvantaged minorities (Cashmore et al., 2000), especially regarding education, need to permeate educational institutions. In this direction, the University for All Program - ProUni (Brasil, 2005)—as a program for access to higher education in private institutions, whether for-profit or non-profit, has been playing an important role in providing access to this level of education for underrepresented groups, awarding a total of 2,858,950 scholarships from 2005, when it was implemented, to 2022 (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2023). On the other hand, the 2022 Higher Education Census, regardless of the administrative category of higher education institutions, shows a mismatch between new entrants and graduates (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2024), from which it can be inferred that there is dropout at this level of education. According to Gaioso (2005) and Alves (2005), among the factors that contribute to dropout rates are lack of vocational guidance, wrong choice of course, lack of prerequisites, and lack of socioeconomic conditions, among others.

Issues such as access, retention, dropout rates in higher education, and its graduates have been the subject of numerous studies, including those by Felicetti, Cabrera, Costa-Morosini (2014) and Felicetti and Cabrera (2017a, 2018). In their studies of graduates from non-profit institutions, the aforementioned authors present comparative analyses between graduates who were ProUni scholarship recipients and those who were not. Linked to studies with graduates is professional training, as this is directly associated with the student's profile and meets the diverse demands of society. Therefore, developing a curriculum that, in addition to complying with curricular guidelines, meets the needs of students in synergy with the globalized, interconnected world with rapid and global changes is necessary for training. To this end, listening to graduates and finding out how they are doing after graduation can be an indicator to their institutions about the training they have received and whether it meets the expected profile of graduates from each course.

In this regard, some questions contribute to research in this area, as is the case with the subject of this article: What leads a future academic student to choose one course over another? What has motivated their academic and professional choices? What makes them stay in a course, even when some situations do not favor its completion? Would it be possible to have indicators that show their satisfaction with the course or area they have chosen?

This article presents the results of a survey conducted from 2021 to 2023 with graduates from five Brazilian non-profit higher education institutions, one from each region. The indicators help to answer the questions above and, at the same time, to reflect on the profile of the academics who are served by higher education institutions and what they seek when choosing their course of study.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The choice of an undergraduate course may be related to professional satisfaction. The relationship between course selection and professional satisfaction is complex and varies depending on several factors. One factor may be the desire for a particular profession because enjoying your studies is likely related to satisfaction with your work after graduation.

The skills and/or competencies developed in an undergraduate program may also be associated with the reasons for choosing the program, which can lead to personal and professional satisfaction given one's predisposition to study and what the program offers. According to Bartalotti and Menezes-Filho (2007, p. 492), "[...] the individual factor in the choice of an undergraduate course is the individual's vocation. People have different preference maps, and within them, each individual chooses the combination of activities that maximizes their usefulness". Saviani (2007, p. 155) states that "[...] work defines human essence." Thus, employment prospects may also be a motivation because areas with high demand in the job market tend to offer more opportunities and better satisfaction in the profession.

Felicetti (2018, p. 219) corroborates this statement when discussing the choice of degree courses, stating that there is “[...] a relationship between personality, choice, and affinities with the profession. However, it is in the teacher training process that choices and intentions toward the profession are strengthened.” Thus, future professionals often unintentionally show signs early in life of the area they wish to pursue. Choosing a particular course of study is the first step in making this a reality, allowing students to complete their programs and become the professionals they aspire to be.

Some studies have indicated that the profile of new students has changed significantly recently (Felicetti; Santos, 2019; Felicetti; Morosini; Corbin, 2025). Nowadays, more people have access to higher education, making the student population more diverse. Individuals facing initial disadvantages, which “[...] exist independently of each person’s wishes and include characteristics such as race, gender, age, disabilities, family, and socioeconomic status” (Felicetti; Morosini, 2009, p. 12), now have greater access to higher education. Along with this diversity, there is a group of students who are the first in their families to attend college, which enriches the student body. According to Barth (1990), differences are a free and renewable resource that provides great learning opportunities because difference matters in people and in school contexts.

However, these studies, as well as that of Santos, Mondlane and Rodrigues (2024), point out that if institutions do not pay attention to what new students have signaled, especially regarding the diverse student profile, then dropout rates may increase if courses do not meet students’ expectations and help them achieve their goals.

These are different realities that bring various expectations about the realization of the dream of graduating and entering society with prospects for better jobs and salaries. Gondim (2002) presents a survey of university students from various courses at a higher education institution on professional profiles and the job market. Some findings are worth highlighting here: students stated that professional identity is constructed during the course, which has already been confirmed in studies by Felicetti (2014) and Soares (2023), for example. It is also important to add that life history, life processes, and the individual’s relationships with their environment also affect the professional they want to be (Souza; Bridi, 2024).

These findings can help institutions organize their courses, assuming that students bring perspectives and dreams that align with who they are and who they aspire to be as individuals and professionals. Additionally, societal demands require professionals to have multidisciplinary knowledge and techniques, necessitating specialization courses after graduation. These requirements highlight the inadequacy of the training provided by higher education institutions for the current job market.

Conversely, the Public Policy Guidelines for Brazilian Higher Education, developed by the Association of Higher Education Institutions (SEMESP) in 2017, clarify necessary aspects of offering courses in the contemporary world.

The policy to be implemented must be capable of combining the need to expand quality higher education, which is of great importance for the country, for social equity, and for improving the living conditions of the population, with the great institutional differentiation that is characteristic of higher education, which needs to serve people with very different socioeconomic and educational profiles and a highly differentiated labor market (São Paulo, 2017, p. 5).

Higher education is characterized by providing opportunities for entry into or qualification for the job market. This requires educational institutions to adapt to new training requirements and different audiences. To this end, Fava (2016, p. 268) states, “Educational institutions no longer have time for inertia, lethargy, apathy, or negligence regarding new training requirements. It is necessary to act, get involved, and wake up, or risk jeopardizing their survival.” In this context, it is also important for institutions to listen to their graduates. They have completed the program and are familiar with its strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, most of them are already in the job market. They can offer valuable insights on how to improve the course in a concrete way. These perceptions

can lead to the development of courses that address societal needs, as Silva, Maniglia, and Figueiredo (2020) affirm.

Surveys of graduates reveal various perspectives, such as knowledge gained from the program and satisfaction with the degree obtained. These surveys demonstrate the extent to which the program has contributed to graduates' professional and personal growth. This has been confirmed by Felicetti (2014), Instituto Península (2019), Bezerra (2021), and Soares (2023), among others. These data are reinforced by the results presented here.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study used a Google Forms questionnaire completed by graduates. The responses were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics from Bós (2012) and Acock (2014). A total of 1,145 graduates participated in the study, providing a representative sample from the five Brazilian regions and corresponding to participation from five non-profit higher education institutions, one from each region.

The initial database was provided by the protocol of the five higher education institutions, four of which came from the Higher Education: Access, Path, and Results (PHASE I) project. One institution corresponded to a project with the same title but PHASE II. The initial database contained information on all new students enrolled in undergraduate courses at the higher education institution (HEI) in 2005 at its various campuses. The data were organized to identify graduates from these cohorts, who were sent the research questionnaire. The questionnaire was answered between March 2018 and June 2022 and validated by Felicetti and Cabrera (2017a, 2017b, 2018). Each participating institution sent the questionnaires by email, created specifically for the survey, and monitored them with the support of the project coordinator.

According to Acock (2014), the data were initially organized and processed in an Excel spreadsheet and then imported into Stata/IC13.1 for statistical and inferential analyses relevant to this study. The research coordinator has a license for Stata/IC13.1, is familiar with it, and has mastered it. The software offers resources for analyzing complex research data, which is why it was chosen. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed. The chi-squared test was used to examine the relationship between ProUni participation and the variables included in the research instrument. According to Bós (2012), the levels of significance were considered as follows: less than 5% ($p < 0.05$) is significant, and between 5% and 10% (0.05 and 0.1) is considered indicative of significance. A t-test was used to determine if there was a significant difference between ProUni and non-ProUni graduates in each Brazilian region and in the overall regional calculation.

Stata/IC13.1 imported a total of 1,145 responses, and values were assigned to the variables according to the response format options on the Likert scale. Two scale formats were used. The first scale format contained questions with response options involving a degree of agreement. The assignment was as follows: strongly disagree was replaced by 1; partially disagree by 2; neither agree nor disagree by 3; partially agree by 4; and strongly agree by 5.

The second scale format had a different assignment. In this format, the assignment was as follows: totally dissatisfied was replaced by 1; partially dissatisfied by 2; neither satisfied nor dissatisfied by 3; partially satisfied by 4; and totally satisfied by 5 for questions involving responses with a degree of satisfaction. The maximum average was considered to be 5 in each analyzed group.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 1,145 people responded to this survey. The North region had the largest representation, at 399 respondents (34.9%). This was followed by the Southeast region with 241 respondents (21%), the Midwest region with 212 respondents (18.5%), the South region with 197 respondents (17.2%), and the Northeast region with 96 respondents (8.4%), which had the smallest representation.

Of the five regions surveyed, only two had more male than female graduates: the North region, with 42 (60%) male ProUni graduates and 41 (51.9%) male non-ProUni graduates, and the Northeast region, with 41 (51.9%) male ProUni graduates and 39 (49.1%) male non-ProUni graduates. In the other regions, the highest percentages were among women in both the ProUni and non-ProUni strata, totaling 514 non-ProUni and 222 ProUni graduates. These percentages correspond to 55.8% and 59.5%, respectively, of the total 1,145 graduates. There was no statistically significant relationship between gender within each region or between regions. The higher representation of female higher education graduates found here aligns with Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira's (2022) findings that women are the largest student group in undergraduate courses, both face-to-face and distance learning.

Regarding the race of the respondents, it should be noted that only two regions had Indigenous graduates: one non-scholarship recipient in the South and four ProUni scholarship recipients in the North. These graduates corresponded to 0.4% of the total.

The Midwest region had more brown graduates than white graduates, with 17 (44.7%) ProUni students. The North had the most brown respondents in both categories: 189 (57.4%) without scholarships and 49 (70%) with scholarships. The Northeast had six (35.3%) brown graduates among scholarship recipients. Regarding the percentage of Black people, the Midwest region stands out with eight (21.1%) scholarship graduates, and the Northeast region stands out with 24 (30.4%) non-scholarship recipients and seven (41.2%) scholarship recipients. In the South and Southeast, most respondents are white, whether they are scholarship recipients or not. In the Midwest, most white people are in the non-scholarship stratum. In the North, the majority in both strata are brown. In the Northeast, the majority are white non-scholarship recipients. Only in the South was there no statistically significant relationship between race and scholarship status. The other four regions have a higher representation of scholarship recipients among brown and Black races, which highlights the social relevance of ProUni. However, it is important to note that the population of the South is predominantly white, which could explain the low number of scholarship recipients in the black or brown categories. All survey participants answered this question.

The data confirm what the 2022 Brazilian Census revealed.

[...] for the first time since 1991, the majority of the Brazilian population (45.3%) identified as brown; equivalent to around 92.1 million people [...] The survey also revealed that, in 2022, around 43.5% (88.2 million people) identified as white, 10.2% (20.6 million) declared themselves black, 0.6% of people (1.2 million) declared themselves indigenous, and 0.4% (850,100) declared themselves yellow (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2022, n/p.).

On the other hand, the Technical Summary of the Higher Education Census (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2022) presents the data differently. First, the report highlights that 19.9% of people did not declare their race. It states that "there are white (3,752,736 or 41.4%), brown (2,693,336 or 29.7%), black (642,686 or 7.1%), yellow (135,339 or 1.5%), and indigenous (41,900 or 0.5%)" respondents (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2024). Both public and private higher education institutions, whether offering in-person or distance learning programs, still serve a large percentage of white students. Once again, it is clear that ProUni serves a higher percentage of brown and black students.

The 19.9% who did not declare their race can be considered reflecting a society that still faces prejudice and denial of racial belonging. This hinders accurate diagnoses and the implementation of effective public policies. Additionally, data from the Higher Education Census (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2022) indicates that programs such as ProUni have increased access to higher education for brown and black individuals. This underscores the importance of affirmative action policies aimed at racial equity, including quotas and scholarships, which seek to address structural inequalities and promote the greater inclusion of Black individuals in higher education.

Regarding the age of entry into higher education, it can be observed that the largest number of entrants, whether ProUni or not, are in the 18-25 age group in the South, Southeast, and Northeast regions. Only ProUni graduates in the Northeast do not correspond to the majority. In the Midwest, the majority of both groups are between 25 and 35 years old. In the North, the majority of entrants are ProUni recipients aged 18 or over and under 25. Among non-ProUni recipients, the highest percentage are aged 25 or over and under 35. A statistically significant relationship was found between having been a scholarship recipient and not having been one, as well as age, in the South and North regions. These findings align with goal 12 of the National Education Plan (2014-2024): “To increase the gross enrollment rate in higher education to 50% and the net enrollment rate to 33% of the 18-24 age group, while ensuring quality and expanding to at least 40% of new enrollments in the public sector” (Brasil, 2014a, p. 52).

Figures 1 and 2 show the responses of all survey participants organized, respectively, by whether or not they received a scholarship. Notably, seven of the eight sub-questions that comprise the question “What led you to choose this course?” have the highest percentage of responses in the “I totally agree” option. The only subquestion, “Salary,” had the highest percentage of responses in the “Partially agree” option. These results highlight the reasons for choosing a course of study at the postsecondary level and may also suggest that the choice of profession is related to both intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Intrinsic and extrinsic needs are related to job satisfaction and comprise two sets of factors postulated by Herzberg (1971) in his Two-Factor Theory. Extrinsic factors refer to maintenance factors, while intrinsic factors are represented by motivation or growth factors (Herzberg et al., 1957; Herzberg; Mausner; Snyderman, 1959, 2005; Herzberg, 1971). According to these authors, extrinsic factors relate to conditions for development at work rather than to the work itself. These factors include status, benefits, salary, stability, vacations, interpersonal relationships, and the policies and management of the employing institution.

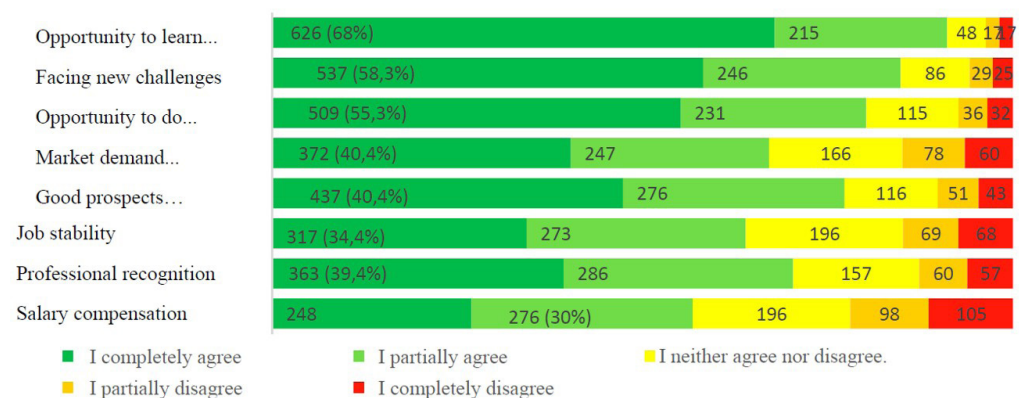


Figure 1. What led you to choose this course? Non-ProUni graduate.

Source: Authors' database.

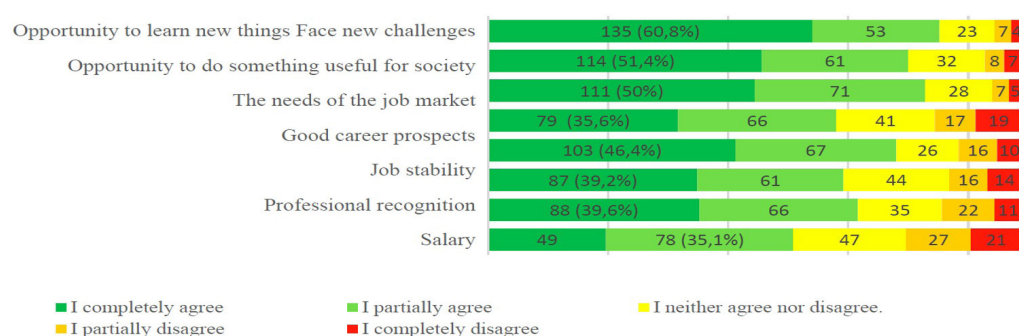


Figure 2. What led you to choose this course? ProUni graduate.

Source: Authors' database.

If not satisfied, extrinsic factors can cause dissatisfaction. However, if satisfied, they do not motivate; they only prevent dissatisfaction. Intrinsic factors, on the other hand, are directly related to the work itself. Examples include fulfillment, professional recognition, responsibility, the opportunity to do something new and meaningful, the opportunity to do something challenging, participating in decision-making, and feeling important to the institution. According to Herzberg et al. (1957), Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman (1959, 2005), and Herzberg (1971), intrinsic factors are related to what people are capable of being and what they aspire to be. According to these authors, the absence of these factors does not cause dissatisfaction, only the absence of satisfaction. Among both scholarship recipients and non-recipients, the percentages of agreement regarding extrinsic and intrinsic factors show that the choice of course is associated with aspects necessary for survival in society and with aspects that lead to fulfillment. This is evident in the responses to satisfaction-related questions (Figure 3), including satisfaction with education, job opportunities in the field of study, personal growth opportunities, and current work and salary.

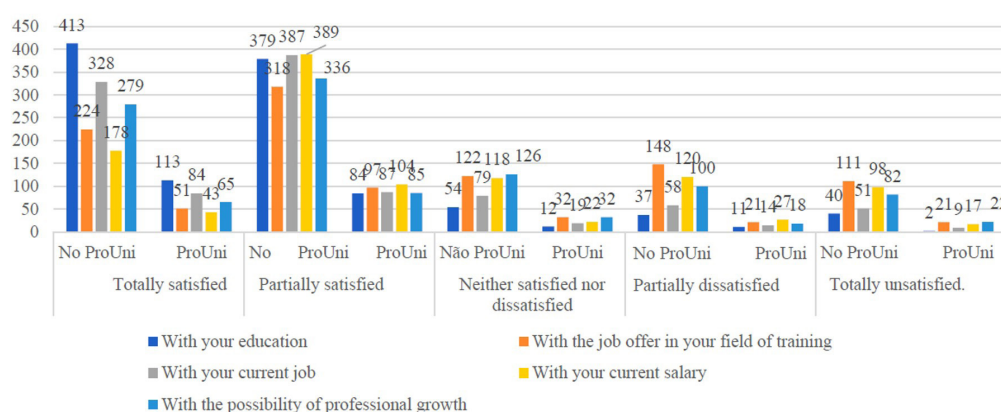


Figure 3. Satisfaction with.
Source: Author's database.

It should be noted that, in the total strata between graduates and satisfaction with their education, the figures for satisfaction (total and partial) total 792 (86%) and 197 (88.7%), respectively, for graduates who were not scholarship recipients and those who were. Satisfaction with higher education training had the highest response percentages for partially satisfied in two strata of non-ProUni graduates, the South and Midwest regions, while the other strata had the highest percentage in the totally satisfied option.

Satisfaction with training can indicate several aspects, including the choice of course and the training provided by the university. There was no statistically significant relationship between the graduate strata and satisfaction with education.

Satisfaction with job opportunities in education shows the highest percentages for the "partially satisfied" option. In only one stratum of non-ProUni graduates, the Northeast region, the highest percentage is totally satisfied. Notably, the total number of graduates who were not scholarship recipients and who were satisfied (totally or partially) with job opportunities is 542 (58.8%), while the total number of scholarship recipients who were satisfied (totally or partially) is 148 (66.7%). A statistically significant relationship ($p=0.029$) was found between graduate strata and satisfaction with training. In the North region, there was an indication of significance between the graduate strata and job opportunities.

The highest percentages of responses for satisfaction with the current work performed by graduates were in the partially satisfied option in five of the graduate strata and in the completely satisfied option in another five. Summing the results by region, we find that, in terms of satisfaction, 715 (77.6%) of graduates who were not scholarship recipients and 171 (77%) of those who were are partially satisfied. There was no statistically significant relationship between graduate strata and satisfaction with current work. Of the 1,145 graduate

respondents, only those who were working at the time of the survey responded to this question, totaling 1,116 (97.5%). In both strata and in all regions, 389 (42.2%) of non-ProUni students and 104 (46.8%) of ProUni students chose the partially satisfied option. Combining the partial and total satisfaction figures, 567 (61.5%) of the non-ProUni graduates and 147 (66.2%) of the ProUni graduates were satisfied. There was no statistically significant relationship between graduate strata and satisfaction with salary.

The majority of responses for satisfaction with the possibility of professional growth were in the “partially satisfied” category: 336 (36.5%) among those who were not scholarship recipients and 85 (38.3%) among those who were. Combining the satisfaction percentages, 66.8% of those who did not receive scholarships and 67.6% of those who did were partially or totally satisfied. There was no statistically significant relationship between satisfaction with the possibility of professional growth and the two graduate groups.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, higher education has faced many challenges, including offering courses that meet societal and professional needs. Nevertheless, graduates have indicated that these courses have contributed to their personal and professional satisfaction.

Data from the 1,145 respondents show that they are satisfied with their education and enthusiastic about their current jobs. While they are not satisfied with their compensation, they realize that a higher degree may increase their earning potential.

The factors that drive choice and satisfaction are related to maintaining, surviving, and living in society, as well as fulfillment. Most of the surveyed graduates express satisfaction with their education, job opportunities in their field, the possibility of personal growth, their work, and their current salary.

This underscores the significance of ProUni and similar initiatives in facilitating access to higher education, fostering social inclusion, mitigating inequalities, and providing students with improved life prospects.

Analysis of data on the satisfaction of higher education graduates shows progress in academic training and entry into the labor market. However, the data also raises questions about access and retention conditions, especially when considering racial differences. While the research participants are enthusiastic about their education and professional prospects, it is important to acknowledge that this opportunity is not yet equitable for all. In Brazil, historically, the Black population, especially young Black and Brown individuals, has faced structural challenges in accessing higher education and completing their courses.

Government initiatives such as ProUni and racial quotas are milestones in promoting access and reducing disparities to expand opportunities for social inclusion (Brasil, 2014b, 2025). However, admission is only the beginning. Ensuring quality retention requires strengthening student support policies, providing pedagogical support, fostering welcoming environments, and combating institutional racism. Therefore, graduates’ satisfaction must be considered in light of the social and racial inequalities that still permeate the educational system. Promoting equity in higher education means more than ensuring access; it also requires a commitment to academic programs that respect, welcome, and value the racial and social diversity of students.

Consequently, public policies must continually evolve to address regional and global needs, focusing on creating a more inclusive, equitable, and high-quality system that contributes to the comprehensive development of citizens.

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Authors contribution

VLF: Project coordination, Study conceptualization, Methodological design, Data management, Data collection, Statistical design, Data visualization (preparation of tables, charts, and graphic elements), Analysis and interpretation of results, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Provision of resources, Validation, Drafting of the manuscript, Critical review and approval of the final version. EFS: Literature review, Data analysis and interpretation, Drafting of the original manuscript, Critical review and approval of the final version. PCC: Literature review, Data analysis and interpretation, Drafting of the original manuscript, Critical review and approval of the final version.

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