

Access to higher education through affirmative action in Brazil: in search of social equity¹

*Acesso ao ensino superior por meio de ações afirmativas no Brasil:
em busca de equidade social*
*Acceso a la educación superior a través de la acción afirmativa en Brasil:
en busca de la equidad social*

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Abstract: The objective of the research was to verify if the difference in academic performance of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of quotas in the National High School Exam (ENEM) is reduced in relation to that found by the Coefficient of Academic Performance (CRA). The ENEM is an exam carried out in Brazil at the end of basic education for entry into higher education, and the CRA is obtained throughout the academic trajectory of students at the University. The literature review emphasized articles on quotas policy in public universities, social inequalities and human capital theory. The quantitative research found that, when analyzing the CRA, 64.91% of the subvariables indicated that there was no difference in performance between the two groups. The qualitative research found that in 100% of the statements made by undergraduate beneficiaries it was expressed a feeling that entering the Federal University of Espírito Santo (UFES) and obtaining the

diploma resulted in changes in their lives in the perspective of increasing self-esteem and personal and professional growth. The study adds knowledge to the field of affirmative action in Brazil by analyzing the benefits of the Quota policy for minorities who have access to Higher Education. From a practical perspective, this study contributes to the analysis and appreciation of this policy, which completes 10 years of existence.

Keywords: Social equity. Affirmative Action Quota. Citizenship. Academic achievement.

Resumo: O objetivo da pesquisa foi verificar se a diferença de desempenho acadêmico de beneficiários e não beneficiários de cotas no Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM) é reduzida em relação ao encontrado pelo Coeficiente de Rendimento Acadêmico (CRA). O ENEM é um exame realizado no Brasil ao final do ensino básico para o ingresso na educação superior, sendo que o CRA é obtido ao longo da trajetória acadêmica dos alunos na Universidade. A revisão da literatura enfatizou artigos sobre a política pública de cotas nas universidades públicas, desigualdades sociais e teoria do capital humano. A pesquisa quantitativa constatou que, ao se analisar o CRA, 64,91% das subvariáveis indicaram que não houve diferença no desempenho entre os dois grupos. A pesquisa qualitativa constatou que em 100% dos depoimentos dos cotistas de graduação foi expresso o sentimento de que o ingresso na Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES) e a obtenção do diploma resultaram em mudanças em suas vidas na perspectiva de aumento da autoestima e crescimento pessoal e profissional. O estudo acrescenta conhecimento ao campo das ações afirmativas no Brasil ao analisar os benefícios da política de Cotas para as minorias que têm acesso ao Ensino Superior. Na perspectiva prática este estudo contribui para a análise e apreciação desta política que completa 10 anos de existência.

Palavras-chave: Igualdade Social. Ação afirmativa. Cidadania. Sucesso acadêmico.

Resumen: El objetivo de la investigación fue verificar si la diferencia en el rendimiento académico de beneficiarios y no beneficiarios de cuotas en el Examen Nacional de Escuela Secundaria (ENEM) se reduce en relación a la encontrada por el Coeficiente de Rendimiento Académico (CRA). El ENEM es un examen realizado en Brasil al final de la enseñanza media para el ingreso a la enseñanza superior, y el CRA se obtiene a lo largo de la trayectoria académica de los alumnos de la Universidad. La revisión de la literatura enfatizó artículos sobre políticas de cuotas en universidades públicas, desigualdades sociales y teoría del capital humano. La investigación cuantitativa encontró que, al analizar el CRA, el 64,91% de las subvariables indicaron que no hubo diferencia en el desempeño entre los dos grupos. La investigación cualitativa encontró que en el 100% de las declaraciones de los beneficiarios de pregrado se expresó un sentimiento que ingresar a la Universidad Federal de Espírito Santo (UFES) y obtener el diploma resultó en cambios en sus vidas en la perspectiva del aumento de la autoestima y crecimiento personal y profesional. El estudio agrega conocimiento al campo de la acción afirmativa en Brasil al analizar los beneficios de la política de Cuotas para las minorías que acceden a la Educación Superior. Desde una perspectiva práctica, este estudio contribuye al análisis y valoración de esta política, que completa 10 años de existencia.

Palabras clave: Igualdad Social. Cuota de acción afirmativa. Ciudadanía. Logro académico.

INTRODUCTION

Social equity in Brazil has been ignored by governments over time. From the 16th century to the end of the 20th century, legality has been shaped to allow the exploitation of historically vulnerable populations (RUBIN; BAYMA OLIVEIRA; NICHOLSON, 2020). By way of illustration, the legacy of slavery led Brazil to appear as the last country in the West to abolish slavery (SCHWARCZ; STARLING, 2018) and to perpetuate inequalities expressed by the low representation of blacks in leadership positions (MITCHELL-WALTHOUR, 2018). The neglect of minorities, making them invisible, resulted in the lack of public policies aimed at combating social inequalities. The Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988 understands social equity as a phenomenon that deserves attention from the state, legitimizing measures to fight it.

This article focuses on the public policies adopted to promote access to minorities to higher education. Its objective is to answer the following question: do quotas in higher education reduce social inequalities?

Quota for higher education is a very recent issue in Brazil. It was instituted and became mandatory in the Federal Universities in 2012, through Federal Law 12,711/12. Although it is a recent law, several public universities had already adopted some form of admission that benefits minorities who, given their socioeconomic status, were unlikely to enter higher education. The aforementioned law, in addition to making the quota compulsory in the Federal Universities, establishes the norms for this form of admission.

Since 2008, the Federal University of Espírito Santo (UFES), where this research was carried out, has adopted an alternative admission system called Social Quota, an admission system which differs little from federal law.

In order to find answers for the question of whether the difference in the academic performance between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the quotas in the National High School Exam (ENEM), is reduced in comparison to that found in the Coefficient of Academic Performance (CAP) (obtained after entering higher education), a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative research) was adopted (CRESWELL, 2009). The results of the quantitative research were obtained and then the findings were assessed by using a qualitative approach. In the quantitative analysis, the study used Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), whereas for the qualitative approach the sentiment analysis was adopted (DI CARO; GRELLA, 2013; OLIVEIRA, 2015; PANG; LEE, 2008; SOBKOWICZ; KASCHEKY; BOUCHAR, 2012; OLIVEIRA; BERMEJO, 2017; AGUIAR, 2012b). In order to determine results related to academic performance, the study also used ANOVA (BUSSAB; MORETTIN, 2002).

This article contributes by showing the results of academic performance of beneficiaries of the affirmative action quota in comparison to non-beneficiaries, as well as the consequences of the adoption of quota and the performance of the beneficiaries throughout and after undergraduate. Although the results are still partial, in terms of the universe of the study and the short time of quota implementation, the research contributes to monitor the effectiveness of the affirmative action - quota - in reducing social inequality in Brazil. In addition, the article covers the issues of social equity, citizenship and affirmative action quota, discussing the theory of human capital.

SOCIAL INEQUALITY, CITIZENSHIP AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION QUOTA

Social inequality in Brazil reaches historical dimensions. The indigenous population, the first inhabitants of the country, were expelled and in the process many tribes were decimated. Not finding sufficient manpower in the indigenous population, African's were enslaved to the country for heavy labor. These two facts show how much social inequality has been present in Brazil since the beginning of colonization by different governments over the centuries.

Over time, slavery was abolished, however nothing was done to remove the black population from the condition of sub-citizenship and to guarantee their rights (SALES, 1994; SILVA, 2011; ALPHONSE, 2015).

Citizenship is understood as the individual being recognized and having their rights promoted and respected by the state. It is this reciprocity of the rights and duties between individuals and the state that avoids the misconception of citizenship granted by the state to the individual through social welfare and paternalism (SILVA, 2011).

As a result of complexity of society and of increasing citizen's needs, the presence of the state providing public policies became increasingly important, whether as an implementing agent or executor, or as grantor, regulator and controller, the latter, in cases where public policies are operated by third parties.

Public policies are governmental programs aimed at achieving socially and politically determined objectives, operated by both the government and private initiatives, but coordinated by the government. Such policies are always aimed at providing society with material benefits that show the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. Implementation and execution of these policies involve a plurality of actions seeking to diagnose, interpret, identify alternatives, implement, and evaluate them (BRAVO, 2002; OLIVEIRA, 2014; CARNEIRO, 2015).

Prior to 1988, the right to equality, provided for in the Brazilian Constitutions, was merely formal, that is, everyone was considered equal before the law, and that was enough. It was, however, necessary to recognize that inequality was a reality lived by society and consequently to support actions of the state to reduce inequalities and promote social equality, as well as to consider equality as a citizen's right (ROCHA, 1996; MOREIRA, 2008; SILVA, 2012a).

The Federal Constitution of 1988 makes clear “the idea that we do not have social democracy and social justice, but the law has been drawn up in order to address them”. The Constitution expresses the concern to establish a democratic state with the objective of ensuring “the exercise of social and individual rights [...] equity and justice as the supreme values of a fraternal, pluralist and unprejudiced society” (ROCHA, 1996, p. 288).

And in the light of the constitutional principle of equality and of adherence to social reality, “affirmative action rebuilds the social fabric, introducing new proposals for political coexistence, in which new paths are discovered for equality, enforced rather than just written in the law, what yesterday's prejudice biased without a worthy human cause” (ROCHA, 1996, p. 295).

Affirmative action in a broader context is characterized as an action that seeks to provide equal opportunity, with equity, to certain social groups during a certain period of time, in order to correct a situation of discrimination and social inequality (MOEHLECKE, 2002; SILVA, 2012b).

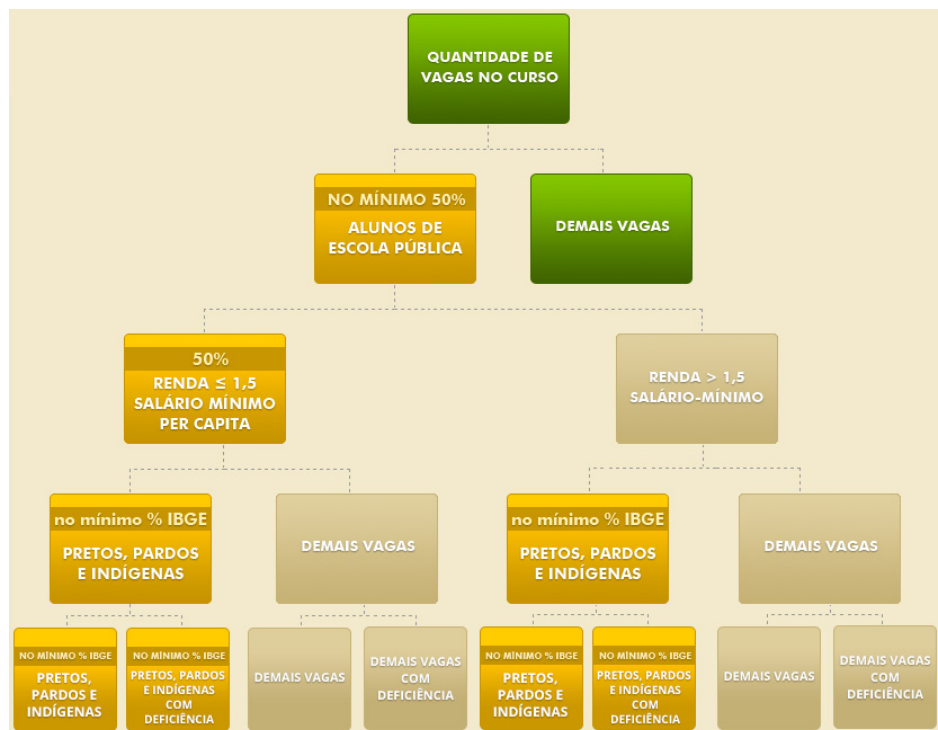
The affirmative action, object of this study, is the quota for higher education (SANTOS, 2012). Its aim is to provide a differentiated way, through university vacancies, so citizens from underprivileged socioeconomic background can, through higher education, overcome inequalities in the pursuit of social equality (TEIXEIRA, 2018). According to Oliveira and Falavinha (2010), education, as part of human dignity, constitutes the most efficient means for personal growth and contributes to human dignity.

The affirmative action quota was officially implemented at federal universities through Law 12,711/12 (BRASIL, 2012). The law determined that at least 50% of vacancies be reserved for students coming from public schools and candidates of lower socioeconomic status. In Brazil, families who can afford send their children to quality private schools that usually prepare students to take the entrance examinations required to free public universities. Consequently, non-minorities students have historically passed the examinations for admission to the public universities (RUBIN et al., 2020).

In addition, within these vacancies, a percentage are reserved to indigenous, ‘pardos’ (browns), blacks and people with disabilities, according to the participation of these groups in each state of the Federation, based on data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

Figure 1 shows how the quota policy should be implemented in Federal Universities.

Figure 1 - Quota System in Brazil: Federal Higher Education Institutions.



Source: <http://portal.mec.gov.br/cotas/sobre-sistema.html>

THE HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY

The human capital theory (HCT) related to the field of Economics of Education is based on the assumption that acquiring more knowledge and skills increases people’s human capital, improving their employability, productivity and salary. Therefore, investments in education provide salary increases, and open

perspectives for more prestigious positions in society, enabling better social inclusion (PARENTE et al., 2011; RIBEIRO, 2015). Education is therefore seen as the pillar of economic and individual development.

The systematic construction of human capital theory is attributed to Theodoro Schultz (1962) based on studies carried out in the 1950s, in the United States. However, the HCT also counted on the contribution of Mincer (1958) and Becker (1964). The authors understand that education makes work more productive, increases the wages of those who had access to it and, consequently, contributes to economic progress (KELNIAR; LOPES; PONTILI, 2013; VIANA; LIMA, 2010).

For Schultz (1962), knowledge is a form of capital and the choice to invest in training is a personal or company decision with the objective of increasing productivity. Since then, several scholars have shown how important human capital is for economic growth, and its relationship with education and income (KELNIAR; LOPES; PONTILI, 2013). Education came to be considered as a primordial factor in income distribution with Mincer (1958), who pointed out the correlation between investment in people's education and income distribution. From this perspective, Becker in the early 1960s related formal education to a form of capital, as it increases the possibility of generating higher incomes (POSTERNAK, 2014).

The influence of these scholars on numerous authors is considerable. In 1960 in Brazil, research on the return on investment in education is very similar to that of other countries and made it possible to perceive the existence of a relationship between years of study and salary range. In other words, each year of study there would be a salary increase, which shows a social improvement as a result of education and encouraged many young people and adults to seek higher education (TAFNER, 2006). In this perspective, the Brazilian economist Langoni in the 1970s related HCT to wage inequalities by verifying those years of education explain the differences in wages (LANGONI, 2005).

However, it should be noted that his work was also the target of criticism, having reappeared in the 1990s and having influenced several economists - José Márcio Camargo, Samuel Pessôa, Marcelo Neri and Ricardo Paes de Barros, among others - who helped to develop social policies associated with school attendance (POSTERNAK, 2014; SIN, TAVARES; AMARAL, 2016).

Social policies in Brazil adopted in the late 1990s and early 2000s incorporated the idea of investment in education - a fundamental element of human capital theory - as the most appropriate mechanism to break the cycle of poverty (POSTERNAK, 2014).

Therefore, there is a convergence of ideas and thoughts from most studies, emphasizing that the path to the development of a country, the increase in income and the well-being of the worker is strongly linked to the level of individual knowledge (KELNIAR; LOPES; PONTILI, 2013).

From the 1980s and early 1990s onwards, the crisis in the labor market resulting from globalization and technological advances caused the reduction and disappearance of many jobs and increased competitiveness among workers. This change in the scenario led to the need for flexible worker, capable of performing various functions and the notion of employability gains evidence in this new context. Two concepts of employability are presented: individual - the worker's ability to adapt to the new demands of the labor market and the social critic - which deals with employability transferring responsibility for unemployment to the worker, placing the role of society and the State in parentheses (FONSECA; FERREIRA, 2020).

There are many criticisms addressed to human capital theory attributing to this conception a technicist view that disseminates the idea of education as an engine of economic development and individual development, with a focus on productivity and insertion in the labor market.

The literature is extensive, both in national and international studies. Frigotto (1995) highlights the studies of Carnoy (1987), Finkel (1977; 1990) among others on the international level. As for national authors, mentioned studies of Salm (1980) and Arapiraca (1982) among others. Frigotto (1995) criticizes HCT and the "economism" view of education that reduces it to a mere production factor and subordinated to market imperatives. Education, which is defined by the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, conceptions and values articulated to the needs and interests of different classes and social groups, was reduced to a mere factor of production – human capital. It is from the reductionism of education as a technique to prepare human resources for the productive process that the pseudo miracle of social, political and economic equalization among individuals will operate (FRIGOTTO, 1995).

Furthermore, it addresses the contradictions and transformations of capitalism, from 1990 onwards, with the emergence of concepts – Knowledge Society, flexibility, development of competences – whose objective is to increase productivity and meet market objectives. HCT's new conceptions are nothing more than the 1970s economism revisited and, therefore, disseminate knowledge supposedly attainable by all and consequently, capable of eliminating inequalities.

Thus, the HCT covers up conflicts and antagonism that remain in the social structure and perpetuates inequalities (FRIGOTTO, 1995). A counterpoint to the thought that the greater the education, the greater the chance of insertion in

the labor market and the higher the salary is pointed out by Decker and Evangelista (2019). They affirm that the accumulation and concentration of capital do not happen by the number of years of study of the individual.

The human capital theory limits the difficulties of social insertion, employability, and professional performance to the individual level, as if years of study, access to higher education, university degrees were enough to present effective responses to the concentration of income and privileges. In this sense, scholars argue that employability depends not only on individual capacity and proactive disposition, but also on external factors that are difficult to control, that is, beyond individual attributes (SIN; TAVARES; AMARAL, 2016). According to this approach, the research by Tafadzwa (2019) finds that even though graduation increases employability, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and age are stronger determinants for entering the labor market.

In other words, the ineffectiveness of these propositions cannot be sustained when it is verified that the social inequality existing in Brazilian society is not explained exclusively by an unequal distribution of knowledge, but by characteristics of the economic model that tends to concentrate historically produced wealth. Consequently, education could not correct what is built in the existing economic structure itself (AGUIAR, 2012a).

The author adds that the concept of employability serves more to cover up than to explain the reality of the growth in the unemployment rate, the significant increase in precarious employment or the decrease in wages, as its definition addresses the ability of workers to remain employed by the ability to respond to the qualification requirements demanded by the labor market. This concept leaves aside the nature of technological, organizational innovations or low economic growth that determine the existence of high unemployment rates and the widespread dissemination of a process of precarious work. The author also adds that the discourse of combining education and development has an ideological role, as it fulfills the role of freeing the economic system from further criticism (AGUIAR, 2012a).

In short, studies highlight that the Theory of Human Capital (HCT) fails the test of realism by adopting the linear lens of causality and fragile methodologies that disregard the complexity of the social context (MARGISON, 2019). According to this author the theory fails to explain how education raises wages and the reasons that make wages more unequal. In addition, the TCH, when emphasizing the linear relationship between education, employability and remuneration, does not consider that there are other factors that influence the performance of individuals, in addition to schooling, such as: individual intelligence, social level and even the segmentation of employees. markets (LIMA, 1980; ALMEIDA; PEREIRA, 2000).

Finally, Becker (1993) points out that, even though there are numerous studies that prove the positive contributions of human capital to the individual and the population, the Theory of Human Capital simplifies, covers reality and constitutes a mechanism for exploiting labor by capital. In other words, the Human Capital Theory can be sold as a tool for preparing knowledge in favor of capital.

ELEMENTS TO MEASURE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Among the various elements used by the federal government – through the INEP (a national institute of research on education) – to measure academic performance of students, this article highlights ENEM and the National Student Performance Exam (ENADE). ENEM is an exam applied in order to measure performance of students in high school.

The performance in the ENEM is important for this study since it is applied before the individual enters higher education and after attending basic education (elementary and high school). Likewise, it is important to know the performance of these students in ENADE, which is an exam for students at the end of undergraduate, aimed at measuring performance at this educational level. Observing the performance of students in these two exams - ENEM and ENADE - is a way to highlight and demonstrate the social inequality manifested in the comparison between quota beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries throughout their educational trajectory.

According to Ney, Totti and Reid (2010), Carmo and Almeida (2015), Soares and Andrade (2006) and Baqueiros (2015), students' academic performance is influenced by the socioeconomic status. The fact that Law 12,711/12 came in force to reserve vacancies in undergraduate programs in Brazilian Federal Universities for socioeconomic underprivileged groups, indicates that they present a lower performance in the ENEM in comparison to groups that were not included in the law and, consequently, minorities groups have had less chance of accessing higher education (SILVA, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The research used secondary data of students, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, who graduated during the period from 2012 to 2017/1. These same students were located on the database of the UFES commission responsible for the entrance exam (called “vestibular”) through their CPF (social security number). Therefore, only students who joined from the year 2008, the year in which UFES started to use the affirmative action - Quota, were selected.

Using the statistical tool Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) (BUSSAB; MORETTIN, 2002), the means test was carried out, identifying the average performance, in two separated groups, of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in ENEM, identifying the differences in performance between these two groups.

The choice for CAP was made because it presents advantages such as being the result of a process, rather than an isolated evaluation. The academic performance coefficient encompasses the student's commitment to being successful in all activities and subjects of the chosen course throughout the entire undergraduate. The student's performance in this research was measured by the CAP, which is calculated as follows:

CAP = sum (average of the course taken x number of credits of the course) / sum (credits of all courses) (UFES, 2015).

Since the ENEM grade has a different range from that of the CAP, which ranges from zero to ten, the score of these two elements to measure performance was equalized so that they became comparable.

FINDS OF THE QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

The means test was applied using ANOVA. Initially, the study considered, the university with all its campus, centers and undergraduate program. Additionally, 28 questions related to demographics data (called sub-variables) were answered by graduates, beneficiaries of the quota and non-beneficiaries, who completed their undergraduate program from 2012 to 2017/1. It was possible to observe that almost in all of these sub-variables, the performance of the beneficiaries in the ENEM was lower than that of the non-beneficiaries.

It is possible to say that the difference in the performance of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in the ENEM confirms the assumption that student's performance is strongly affected by their socioeconomic status (NEY; TOTTI; REID, 2010; CARMO; ALMEIDA, 2015; BAQUEIROS, 2015).

The same procedure was carried out on the variables 'Campus', 'Centers', 'Undergraduate Program' (bachelor degree/teaching degree) and "Competition index in the entrance exam" (considering the undergraduate program with the highest, lowest and average demand) and adding to them the sub-variables extracted from the socioeconomic questionnaire. The results showed that the beneficiaries' performance in the ENEM was lower than that of non-beneficiaries.

Similarly, the difference in the CAP was also assessed. It was observed that, when taking UFES in general together with the sub-variables included in the socioeconomic questionnaire, 60.82% of the sub-variables indicate that there is no difference in academic performance in the CAP between beneficiaries and non-

beneficiaries of quota. The same procedure was adopted in relation to the variables ‘Campus’, ‘Centers’, ‘Undergraduate Program’ (bachelor degree/teaching degree) and ‘Competition index in the entrance exam’ (considering the undergraduate program with the highest, lowest and average demand) and they all showed that the highest percentage of sub-variables analyzed points to the inexistence of difference in performance between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in the CAP.

Table 1 below shows the variables used for the means test using ANOVA. The first column indicates the variables used to reach the average; the second column shows the percentage of sub-variables, which indicates that the performance of the beneficiaries is the same as the non-beneficiaries in the CAP. Finally, the third column indicates the percentage of sub-variables of academic performance, which shows difference in the results of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in the CAP.

Table 1 - Difference in the academic performance of the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the quota in the CAP

Description	Non-statistically significant difference - % - CAP	Statistically significant difference - % - CAP
Total	60.82	39.18
Campus	58.19	41.81
Centers	65.15	34.85
Competition index (major/minor/median)	67.69	32.31
Bachelor degree / teaching degree	72.66	27.34
Average	64.91	35.09

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Of the sub-variables analyzed, 64.91% indicate that the performance of the beneficiaries in the CAP is the same as the non-beneficiaries. Although the performance of the beneficiaries in ENEM was lower than that of the non-beneficiaries, there was no statistical difference in academic performance between these two groups in CAP, which shows there was a reduction in the difference between the two groups.

By analyzing this result, it is possible to infer that gap in academic performance of the two groups decreased when comparing the performance in the exams before and after entering the university. Combining this result with the literature that suggests academic performance is influenced by the student’s socioeconomic background, it is possible to infer that something changed and some of the socioeconomic sub-variables that influenced academic performance

in the ENEM, reduced the influence regarding the performance in CAP (NEY; TOTTI; REID, 2010; CARMO; ALMEIDA, 2015; SOARES; ANDRADE, 2006; BAQUEIROS, 2015).

FINDS OF THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

The reduction of the academic performance gap between these two groups is a strong sign that something has changed in the life of the beneficiaries of the quota, closing the gap of social inequality. In this sense, a relevant research question is: Did these results bring any consequences to the beneficiaries' lives? If so, which ones?

In order to answer this question, 20 graduates, beneficiaries of quota affirmative action, were interviewed. Of the 20 respondents 04 were interviewed via Skype and the rest in person. The interviewees were part of the sample researched in the quantitative part of the study. The interviewees were randomly selected among the 9,700 students researched using the tool '*randbetween*' in Microsoft Excel®. Regarding the number of interviewees, a statistically calculated sample criterion was not followed. As the purpose of this study is not to quantify but to understand different sentiments, the sample was gathered using the saturation criterion (FRASER, 2004).

The semi-structured interview had four parts. The first explored the adoption of the quota as a strategy to give opportunity to socioeconomically underprivileged students to attend a better-quality institution and to reduce the problem of social inequality through education. The second, focuses on the adoption of the quota in higher education as implemented by Law 12,711/12 in Brazil. The third, tries to understand the changes occurred in the life of the graduates in terms of access to the labor market after obtaining a degree. Finally, the fourth explores the changes, in general, that occurred in the life of the graduates that made them more included in terms of citizenship, closer to the graduates' non-beneficiaries of the quota.

In using the sentiment analysis (AGUIAR, 2012b), the responses and/or excerpts of them were polarized as positive or negative sentiments regarding the part of the interview the respondent was referring to.

The first part showed that 54.10% of the respondents' opinions indicate a positive sentiment about adopting the quota system as a strategy to access better quality educational institutions and having the opportunity to reduce social inequalities through education. The second indicated that 72.90% of the graduates' responses were positive to the fact that the quota was being adopted in higher education. The third showed that 90.50% of the respondents refer positively to changes in the beneficiaries' relation with the labor market after higher education.

And, finally, 100% of the respondents highlight that attending university and higher education programs is responsible for positive changes in their lives, as declared by interviewed 20th: “the quotas became important to whom come from underprivileged social classes. It allows students from other social strata to have access to education”.

These results show that the approximation between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries was not only in academic performance, as evidenced by the quantitative study. Almost 100% of the respondents mentioned that the university has changed the way they think, opening their minds beyond the worldview of their families, schools, and their neighborhoods. This has enabled them to occupy positions in the labor market and being able to have access to goods and services. As a consequence, they felt more integrated and included in relation to the non-beneficiaries.

The adoption of the affirmative action quota has contributed to minimize the perception of social exclusion. The quantitative study shows the reduction in the difference between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries academic performance. In other words, the results refer to performance on the examination at the end of high school (ENEM) and performance during and at the end of the undergraduate program (CAP). The literature suggests that the academic performance of the student is influenced by their socioeconomic status and the interviews with the beneficiaries confirm that the approximation between these groups is a fact.

However, many respondents criticized the adoption of the quota, arguing that the access to quality education for all must take place in basic education and that, unfortunately, it is still inadequate and unsatisfactory. The fact is that the beneficiaries had deficient basic education, and despite access to higher education benefiting from the quota, the learning deficit in basic education makes participation in higher education difficult. This problem is considered one of the reasons for the low performance of students in several courses at undergraduate.

Another important issue to consider is financial and psychological support for low-income students, which allows them to attend university. The lack of financial resources to stay in university is a cause for students to drop out.

Due to issues related to: 1) the need to reinforce the content with students from contexts marked by low education (leveling), as a prerequisite for them to understand the courses, perform well and complete the undergraduate course; and 2) lack of financial resources so that the quota beneficiaries can dedicate themselves to the course; it was important to interview a group of administrators at the university where the research was carried out (UFES). The Provost of Undergraduate and Student Assistance were interviewed, as well as the directors of the Centers and Campus.

As for the leveling issue, 63.60% of the administrators' respondents were polarized as negative, highlighting the absence of institutionalized actions. 36.40% of the respondents had a positive emphasis on the individual initiative of some teachers. On the other hand, 44.40% were administrator's positive response. They pointed to some actions, such as the replacement of monitoring by tutoring, where a group of students and teachers "adopts" students with difficulties in following the course due to a lack of basic education content. In addition, administrative and research scholarships are offered. Additionally, they pointed out that there are initiatives that also include lectures that offer students content that, despite not being a prerequisite for the undergraduate course, help to broaden the worldview. The majority of responses from administrators who are polarized as negative indicate a lack of institutionalized actions.

As for student assistance actions to help students to dedicate to university studies, 50% of the beneficiaries' respondents were polarized as negative. The resources are considered insufficient and do not take into account the local reality. The cost of living in capital cities, cost of rent for example, is higher than it is in other smaller cities in the state of Espírito Santo. On the other hand, the positive responses highlight the financial assistance of the government and from the family, considered crucial to help beneficiaries of the quota system to undergraduate programs.

However, 58.80% of the administrator's responses were polarized as negative, most of them due to students' complaints about insufficient assistance. The other 41.20% are positive as they acknowledge the importance of the assistance provided by the government to keep the student in the university, as well as highlighting the initiative of some centers to combine learning with financial support, integrating the students in need to research projects and others that are paid with scholarships.

Despite the respondents indicating that the opportunity for underprivileged students to access higher education should be offered through the improvement of basic education and not through modifying the criteria of entrance to university; despite the difficulties of the beneficiaries of the quota to follow the undergraduate course due to lack of preparation in terms of basic education and lack of more directed actions by the university; and despite the lack of financial resources to keep students dedicated to higher education; the affirmative action quota has, partially, achieved its goal of reducing social inequalities through education.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was decisive for the interest of carrying out this study to consider the combat of social inequalities as a process. The research converges with the arguments pointing out that the academic performance of students is influenced by their socioeconomic background.

This research contributed to a better understanding of quota policies based on an empirical study on the improvement in the academic performance of quota holders, after being admitted to the university. Furthermore, based on interviews it presented the perception of quota beneficiaries about issues related to promoting self-confidence and their feeling of inclusion in the university environment.

The quantitative study showed that, in most of the sub-variables analyzed, the difference in academic performance between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in the CAP was reduced in relation to the difference at the ENEM. Therefore, the fact that the beneficiaries were given the opportunity to attend higher education resulted in the improvement of their academic performance.

These findings are in line with the literature and researched laws regarding academic performance being influenced by the socioeconomic background of students, the need for public policies to alleviate social discrepancies and the legitimization of quotas as a strategic policy to reduce social inequalities through education. Furthermore, the quantitative study showed evidence that, in higher education, quota beneficiaries improved their academic performance and considerably eliminated the difference in academic performance between them and non-beneficiaries.

As for the qualitative study, it highlighted that the reduction of the difference between the two groups surveyed was positively perceived by the quota beneficiaries, with an effect on their worldview. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that affirmative actions by quotas are contributing through education to reduce social inequalities.

The findings suggest the need for more comprehensive studies on the effects of quotas in higher education, taking into account variables such as geographical location, regional development, and competition in the selection process to access undergraduate programs.

Improvements have been made, but there is still a long way to go. Studies and public policies aimed at improving the quality of basic education should be emphasized, which can alleviate the problems observed by respondents in relation to the need for leveling when entering university and the gaps in education that hinder success in entrance exams for higher education and would avoid students

drop out. Equally important, policies implementation aiming at inserting quotas holders into the labor market and following their trajectory through longitudinal studies.

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