



## PERSPECTIVE OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS ON ADMISSION TO AND RETENTION IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

PERSPECTIVA DE ESTUDANTES INDÍGENAS SOBRE O INGRESSO E A PERMANÊNCIA NA UNIVERSIDADE PÚBLICA: UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO

PERSPECTIVA DE ESTUDIANTES INDÍGENAS SOBRE EL INGRESO Y LA PERMANENCIA EN LA UNIVERSIDAD PÚBLICA: UN ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO

Ana Flávia da Silva Izepato<sup>1</sup>

Vitória Vasconcelos Logullo<sup>1</sup>

Ana Heloisa Mendes<sup>1</sup>

Mariana Enumo Balestre<sup>1</sup>

Elen Ferraz Teston<sup>2</sup>

Sonia Silva Marcon<sup>1</sup>

ORCID: 0009-0000-1281-8393

ORCID: 0000-0002-5811-8533

ORCID: 0009-0001-4658-7009

ORCID: 0009-0007-8079-657X

ORCID: 0000-0001-6835-0574

ORCID: 0000-0002-6607-362X

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Graduate Program in Nursing, Maringá, PR, Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul, Graduate Program in Nursing, Campo Grande, MS, Brazil.

**How to cite:** Izepato AFS, Logullo VV, Mendes AH, Balestre ME, Teston EF, Marcon SS. Perspective of indigenous students on admission to and retention in a public university: a qualitative study. Online Braz J Nurs. 2026;25(1):e20266914. <https://doi.org/10.17665/1676-4285.20266914>

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Compreender as dificuldades e facilidades vivenciadas por estudantes indígenas no processo de ingresso e permanência na universidade. **Método:** Estudo descritivo e exploratório, de abordagem qualitativa, desenvolvido em uma universidade pública localizada no noroeste do estado do Paraná. A coleta de dados ocorreu entre maio e julho de 2024, por meio de entrevistas individuais semiestruturadas, realizadas presencialmente e registradas em áudio. O material empírico foi submetido à análise de conteúdo, na modalidade temática. **Resultados:** Participaram 13 estudantes indígenas, com idades entre 18 e 52 anos, sendo sete mulheres, das quais duas eram casadas. Entre os cursos frequentados, quatro estudantes estavam matriculados em Enfermagem, três em Medicina, três em Direito, um em Química, um em Ciências Contábeis e um havia ingressado recentemente no mestrado em Pedagogia. A análise qualitativa dos dados permitiu a identificação de três categorias temáticas: i) apoio familiar e comunitário como motivação para o ingresso no ensino superior; ii) fatores que dificultam e favorecem a permanência na universidade, destacando-se o distanciamento da família, as barreiras linguísticas, a vulnerabilidade financeira e episódios de preconceito e exclusão, parcialmente atenuados por programas institucionais; e iii) pertencimento e acolhimento: o apoio institucional aos estudantes indígenas, considerado essencial para sua permanência na universidade. **Conclusão:** Os resultados evidenciam a relevância do apoio familiar, da valorização da cultura indígena e da existência de programas institucionais de suporte para a promoção de uma experiência acadêmica positiva entre estudantes indígenas no ensino superior.

**Descritores:** Povos Indígenas; Universidades; Inclusão Social; Diversidade, Equidade.

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To understand the difficulties and facilitators experienced by Indigenous students in the process of admission to and retention in university. **Method:** Descriptive, exploratory, qualitative study developed at a public university located in the northwest region of the state of Paraná. Data collection occurred between May and July 2024 through individual semi-structured interviews conducted in person and recorded in audio. The empirical material was submitted to thematic content analysis. **Results:** A total of 13 Indigenous students participated in the study. They were aged between 18 and 52 years, and seven of them were women, including two who were married. Among the courses attended, four students were enrolled in Nursing, three in Medicine, three in Law, one in Chemistry, one in Accounting Sciences, and one had recently entered a master's program in Education. Qualitative data analysis allowed the identification of three thematic categories: i) family and community support as motivation for admission to higher education; ii) factors that hinder and facilitate retention in university, highlighting distance from family, language barriers, financial vulnerability, and episodes of prejudice and exclusion, partially mitigated by institutional programs; and iii) belonging and welcoming: institutional support for Indigenous students, considered essential for their retention in university. **Conclusion:** The results highlight the relevance of family support, the appreciation of Indigenous culture, and the existence of institutional support programs for promoting a positive academic experience among Indigenous students in higher education.

**Descriptors:** Indigenous Peoples; Universities; Social Inclusion; Diversity, Equity.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Comprender las dificultades y facilidades vivenciadas por estudiantes indígenas en el proceso de ingreso y permanencia en la universidad. **Método:** Estudio descriptivo y exploratorio, con enfoque cualitativo, desarrollado en una universidad pública ubicada en el noroeste del estado de Paraná. La recolección de datos ocurrió entre mayo y julio de 2024, mediante entrevistas individuales semiestruturadas, realizadas de forma presencial y registradas en audio. El material empírico fue sometido a análisis de contenido, en la modalidad temática. **Resultados:** Participaron 13 estudiantes indígenas, con edades entre 18 y 52 años, siendo siete mujeres, de las cuales dos estaban casadas. Entre las carreras cursadas, cuatro estudiantes estaban matriculados en Enfermería, tres en Medicina, tres en Derecho, uno en Química, uno en Ciencias Contables y uno había ingresado recientemente a la maestría en Pedagogía. El análisis cualitativo de los datos permitió la identificación de tres categorías temáticas: i) apoyo familiar y comunitario como motivación para el ingreso a la educación superior; ii) factores que dificultan y favorecen la permanencia en la universidad, destacándose el distanciamiento de la familia, las barreras lingüísticas, la vulnerabilidad financiera y episodios de prejuicio y exclusión, parcialmente atenuados por programas institucionales; y iii) pertenencia y acogida: el apoyo institucional a los estudiantes indígenas, considerado esencial para su permanencia en la universidad. **Conclusión:** Los resultados evidencian la relevancia del apoyo familiar, de la valorización de la cultura indígena y de la existencia de programas institucionales de apoyo para la promoción de una experiencia académica positiva entre estudiantes indígenas en la educación superior.

**Descritores:** Pueblos Indígenas; Universidades; Inclusión Social; Diversidad, Equidad.

### Editors:

Rosimere Ferreira Santana (ORCID: 0000-0002-4593-3715)

Geilsa Soraia Cavalcanti Valente (ORCID: 0000-0003-4488-4912)

### Publisher:

Escola de Enfermagem Aurora de Afonso Costa – UFF

Rua Dr. Celestino, 74 – Centro, CEP: 24020-091 – Niterói, RJ, Brazil

Journal email: objn.cme@id.uff.br

### Corresponding author:

Sonia Silva Marcon

E-mail: soniasilva.marcon@gmail.com

#### What is already known:

- Affirmative policies have contributed to expanding access of Indigenous students to universities.
- When compared with the proportion of entrants, the graduation completion rate among Indigenous students remains low.

#### What this article adds:

- Retention in university is permeated by structural, cultural, and especially linguistic challenges, which may affect the mental health of Indigenous students.
- The higher education journey is strongly supported by family and community support as well as by the commitment to social return and the strengthening of Indigenous communities.

## INTRODUCTION

The movement to implement quota systems in Brazilian universities began in 2003, when Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro established the first system of reserved seats for admission to higher education. At the time, the initiative faced criticism and resistance from the media, which argued that the policy could devalue the university entrance examination. A claim of unconstitutionality even temporarily suspended the institution's selection process<sup>(1)</sup>.

Two decades after the first affirmative action experiences in higher education, quotas have become consolidated as a national inclusion policy in federal higher education institutions. This policy was regulated by Law No. 12.711/2012 and later updated by Law No. 14.723/2023. The legislation establishes the reservation of at least 50% of seats, by program and shift, for students who have completed high school entirely in public schools, considering criteria of family per capita income as well as the proportion of Black, Brown, Indigenous, Quilombola individuals and persons with disabilities in the population of the federative unit where the educational institution is located<sup>(2)</sup>. The regulatory update reaffirms the permanent nature of the quota policy and improves its evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, reinforcing its role in promoting equity and democratizing access to higher education. In parallel, state universities progressively began adopting affirmative action policies, expanding the institutional reach of these initiatives and strengthening the commitment to social and educational justice<sup>(1)</sup>.

The creation of the Indigenous Peoples Entrance Examination in the state of Paraná (PR) stands out. It was established in 2002 by the General Superintendence of Science, Technology and Higher Education. The initiative was supported by State Law No. 13.134/2001 and later modified by State Law No. 14.995/2006, which established additional seats for Indigenous students in the public higher education system of PR, whose organization became the responsibility of the universities<sup>(3)</sup>. The Indigenous Peoples Entrance Examination is conducted by the University for the Indigenous Peoples Commission (CUIA, in Portuguese), composed of representatives from public universities in PR and Indigenous leaders, in a continuous process of dialogue and collective construction<sup>(4)</sup>.

Admission to higher education represents a moment of intense transformation for Indigenous students, as it directly impacts their identities and ways of life. At the same time, the university experience enables contact with different expressions of diversity, such as gender, sexuality, religion, and distinct conceptions of the world, expanding

their experiences and perspectives<sup>(5)</sup>.

A study that analyzed the trajectory of Indigenous students in higher education showed that between 2002 and 2008, 189 seats were offered in the Indigenous Peoples Entrance Examination at universities in PR, with 237 candidates enrolled. Of these, 173 were admitted and 139 (80.3%) effectively enrolled, while 61 (43.9%) dropped out of the program. Among the 51 students enrolled between 2002 and 2004, only 15 had completed or were in the final stage of completion by 2008, corresponding to 29.4% of the total. The difficulties contributing to dropout and interruption of Indigenous academic training stem from multiple factors, including gaps in basic education, lack of knowledge about how the program and the university function, financial difficulties, insufficient institutional support to guarantee conditions for retention, and experiences of prejudice<sup>(6)</sup>.

On the other hand, qualitative research indicated that, despite the adversities, Indigenous students, especially women, demonstrate a high capacity for resilience, determination, and overcoming challenges, seeking to expand educational opportunities and occupy spaces for dialogue and empowerment in the university environment. However, the study also highlighted the need to expand support policies that consider the cultural specificities and social realities of these students<sup>(7)</sup>.

The strengthening of Indigenous school education is deeply related to the existence of consistent public policies that recognize the historical, cultural, and linguistic particularities of these peoples. Important structural challenges remain, such as the production of appropriate teaching materials, the development of specific curricula, and the promotion of equitable conditions for access to and retention in the educational system. Many of these changes depend directly on a favorable political context and on the state's commitment to Indigenous education<sup>(8)</sup>.

In the daily life of universities, weaknesses in retention policies contribute to the production of inequalities, which manifest through difficulties such as insufficient financial aid, weaknesses in pedagogical support, and sociocultural clashes, factors that may result in dropout or prolonged academic trajectories<sup>(9)</sup>. An integrative review that gathered studies conducted in different Brazilian states showed that although affirmative policies have increased the presence of Indigenous students in universities, there is still limited knowledge about their experiences, challenges, and retention strategies, revealing an important gap in the scientific literature<sup>(10)</sup>.

Despite advances in affirmative policies and the increased Indigenous presence in higher education, studies

that investigate in depth the factors that facilitate or hinder the admission and retention of these students in universities remain scarce, especially considering their cultural, social, and economic specificities. Understanding these experiences is essential to support the formulation and improvement of public and institutional policies that ensure not only access but also qualified retention and course completion by Indigenous students. The scarcity of research on the topic limits the capacity for intervention by universities and compromises the effectiveness of affirmative policies.

Associated with these reflections, the empirical observation of difficulties experienced by some Indigenous students, expressed in high failure rates in courses and prolonged time spent in the institution, motivated the formulation of this study. The following question emerged: which factors facilitate or hinder the admission and retention of Indigenous peoples in Brazilian public higher education? To answer this question, the objective was defined as understanding the facilitators and difficulties experienced by Indigenous students in the process of admission to and retention in university.

## METHOD

### Type of study

This is a descriptive, exploratory, qualitative study.

### Study setting

The research was conducted at a public university located in the northwest region of PR, Brazil. In 2024, the institution had 39 Indigenous students enrolled in distance education programs and 34 in in-person programs. The study report was prepared in accordance with the guidelines of the COnsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research.

### Study population

The inclusion criterion established was being an Indigenous student regularly enrolled in any year of in-person programs at the institution, totaling 34 eligible students. As a non-inclusion criterion, not attending classes for a period longer than 30 days without formal justification or not having time available to participate in the interview was established.

Participants were recruited using the non-probabilistic sampling technique known as snowball sampling, which assumes that individuals who share a given social characteristic establish contact networks that facilitate the identification and referral of new participants<sup>(1)</sup>. The first interviewees were Nursing students known to the researchers, who indicated and provided contact information for other potential participants.

### Data collection

Invitation to participate was made in person or through a messaging application. In both modalities, students received information about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to refuse

without any personal or academic consequences. Inclusion of new participants occurred until the data saturation was reached<sup>(12)</sup>, identified when no new referrals emerged or when those referred had already been invited to participate in the study. A total of 20 referrals were considered valid; however, in three cases it was not possible to establish contact after several attempts on different days and times. One person explicitly stated that they did not wish to participate, and three others did not show availability to schedule the interview. Thus, the final sample consisted of 13 participants.

Interviews were conducted between May and July 2024, in person, in a private room at the university, on dates and times previously scheduled according to the availability of the participants and the researcher. All interviews were individual, audio-recorded with consent, and lasted on average between 13 and 40 minutes, with no incidents that compromised the quality of data collection. Each participant was interviewed only once.

A semi-structured interview guide composed of two parts was used. The first included questions aimed at identifying sociodemographic characteristics. The second included open-ended questions related to the object of the study. The guiding question was: "Tell me about your experience as a university student." To encourage verbalization and deepen the responses, support questions were used when necessary, such as: "What was your main motivation for entering higher education?"; "What motivates you to remain at the university?"; "What factors could lead you to drop out of the program?"; "What suggestions would you give to encourage other Indigenous people to enter higher education?"; and "What changes do you consider necessary to improve the academic and life experience of Indigenous students at the university?"

Immediately after each interview, notes were recorded regarding the researcher's impressions and the participants' behavior during the conversation. After transcription, when clarification of any information was necessary (e.g., identifying which family member had completed higher education), participants were contacted through a messaging application.

All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, a final-year undergraduate Nursing student and scientific initiation scholarship holder. The researcher received prior training for qualitative data collection through directed readings and by observing an experienced master's student during the first three interviews. There was no prior relationship with the participants, except for one Indigenous student who was part of her class.

### Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed in full, preserving the colloquial language. Subsequently, necessary orthographic corrections were made without altering the meaning or the original content of the statements. At the end of each interview, participants were asked whether they were interested in reviewing the transcribed material for possible additions or removal of excerpts. All participants, except one, considered this step unnecessary. The transcript was sent via messaging application to the student who expressed

interest in reviewing it; however, no response was received. Therefore, it was decided to keep this participant in the study sample.

All transcribed material was manually submitted to thematic content analysis, following the three stages proposed in prior research<sup>(13)</sup>. In the pre-analysis stage, a floating reading of the entire material was conducted to promote familiarization with the data, identify initial impressions, and define the corpus of analysis. In the material exploration stage, exhaustive readings were conducted, highlighting excerpts relevant to the objectives of the study, referred to as initial codes. These codes were later grouped according to semantic and conceptual similarity, forming units of meaning or themes.

In the third stage, related to data treatment and interpretation, the units of meaning were organized into three thematic categories according to their similarities and with

the aim of synthesizing the meanings attributed by Indigenous students to the experience of being a university student. The interpretation of the categories was carried out in light of the scientific literature, favoring a critical understanding of the investigated phenomenon<sup>(13)</sup>.

The initial coding was conducted by the principal researcher. To ensure greater methodological rigor, one-third of the transcripts were independently analyzed by a master's student with experience in qualitative research. Any divergences were discussed until consensus was reached, ensuring greater reliability in the analytical process. The coding tree was structured into three hierarchical levels: 50 initial codes, derived directly from participants' statements; 11 themes, resulting from the grouping of similar codes; and 3 thematic categories. Box 1 presents this analytical structure.

**Box 1 - Coding tree. Maringá, PR, Brazil, 2024**

Codes	Theme	Thematic categories
New experiences; better future; family; community; struggle of Indigenous peoples	Motivation to pursue higher education	Family and community support as motivation for admission to higher education
Distance; difficulty adapting; Indigenous welcoming; loneliness; anxiety	Admission to university	
Collective victory; pride; return to the community; encouragement/example; family support	Family opinion	
Distance; language barriers; homesickness; prejudice; shyness; culture	Factors that hinder retention	Factors that hinder and facilitate retention in university
Financial support; CUIA; student support; family support; Indigenous support; better future; struggle of Indigenous peoples		
Prejudice; psychological problems; loss of financial support; study difficulties; distance; health problems; unforeseen events	What would lead to dropping out of the program	Belonging and welcoming: institutional support for Indigenous students
Food allowance; transportation allowance; financial aid; quotas; psychological support; tutoring; safety	Institutional support	
Better welcoming; Indigenous space; study workload; housing	Necessary changes for improvement	
New experiences; projects, events, and games; new friendships; security in studies; new cultures	University experiences	
Limited support; CUIA; good support	Support from coordination	
Limited student support; loneliness; difficult adaptation; prejudice; distance; lack of institutional support; homesickness; desire to drop out	University difficulties	

CUIA: University for Indigenous Peoples Commission.

Source: prepared by the authors, 2024.

### Ethical procedures

The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines established by Resolutions No. 466/2012 and No. 510/2016 of the Brazilian National Health Council, which regulate research involving human subjects in Brazil. The project was initially reviewed and authorized by CUIA and subsequently approved by the institution's human research ethics committee (opinion no. 6.189.449).

All participants agreed to participate in the study by signing the informed consent form in two copies. To ensure anonymity, in the presentation of the results the excerpts from the statements were identified by the letter "P," followed by an Arabic numeral corresponding to the order of inclusion of participants in the study.

### RESULTS

A total of 13 Indigenous students participated in the study, aged between 18 and 52 years (mean of 35 years).

Of these, seven were female and two were married (P4 and P11). The year of admission to the university ranged from 2019 to 2024, and the participants were enrolled in five different undergraduate programs. Eight students reported having changed programs at least once during their academic trajectory, and participant P4 had recently begun a master's program in Education.

Regarding the family history of higher education, participants P1 and P4 reported having other family members currently attending higher education. Participants P2 and P11 were the first members of their families to enter a higher education program, while the others reported having family members who had already completed undergraduate degrees. It is also noteworthy that participant P10 had already completed a degree in Dentistry and, at the time of the research, was enrolled in the Chemistry program.

All participants lived in the same city where the university is located. Additional information about the characteristics of the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 -** Characterization of the participants. Maringá, PR, Brazil, 2024

ID	Sex	Age	Year of admission	Program	Program change	Academic year
P1	F	25	2019	Nursing	Yes	3 <sup>rd</sup>
P2	F	20	2022	Accounting Sciences	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>
P3	M	20	2021	Medicine	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup>
P4	F	27	2022	Master's Program	No	2 <sup>nd</sup>
P5	F	24	2023	Law	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>
P6	M	19	2023	Nursing	No	1 <sup>st</sup>
P7	F	18	2024	Medicine	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup>
P8	M	22	2023	Nursing	No	2 <sup>nd</sup>
P9	M	52	2021	Medicine	No	3 <sup>rd</sup>
P10	F	27	2019	Chemistry	No	1 <sup>st</sup>
P11	F	26	2021	Nursing	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup>
P12	M	18	2024	Law	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup>
P13	M	28	2020	Law	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup>

Source: prepared by the authors, 2024.

The qualitative data analysis enabled the identification of three thematic categories that express aspects experienced in everyday academic life and that mark the trajectory of Indigenous students in the university environment. The process of admission to higher education emerged indirectly in the participants' statements, being strongly related to family and community support, as well as to the experiences lived during the first moments of university life. These elements contributed to understanding the facilitators and difficulties reported throughout the academic trajectory. The thematic categories identified were: i) Family and community support as motivation for admission to higher education; ii) Factors that hinder and facilitate retention in the university; and iii) Belonging and welcoming: institutional support for Indigenous students. These categories are presented and discussed below.

**Family and community support as motivation for admission to higher education**

When recalling their trajectory until admission to the university, participants highlighted the fundamental role of family and the Indigenous community as sources of encouragement to pursue higher education.

*My family was the reason and the motivation. They encouraged me, and because I am the oldest daughter, they said, "Go, my daughter, go study." We are a very humble family, so it is a victory to have someone continuing their education. And this serves as an example for the rest of the family, for my other siblings. My family was the push that made me leave that comfort zone and go in search of a better future. (P4)*

In addition to the encouragement received, participants also expressed the desire to give back to their families and communities for the support they had received, placing their professional training at the service of collective needs.

*[...] precisely to contribute not only to my family but also to my Indigenous land, to my municipality, and to other Indigenous teachers in general (P4)*

*There are not many professionals where I live, in my village. So there is this difficulty in communication between the professional and the patient. That is why I decided to study Dentistry, to help the people there (P10)*

The reports also reveal a strong sense of belonging and pride in Indigenous identity, associated with the perception that admission to university represents a collective achievement. In this sense, academic training is understood as a continuation of the historical struggles of Indigenous peoples and as a possibility for building a better future for the community.

*What motivated me was seeing the struggle of my people, something I have experienced since I was a child [...]. (P5)*

*[...] What motivates me is the strength my ancestors had so that one day I could be here, because getting these places at the university did not happen overnight. It was not something that someone simply handed over. It came from the struggles of our leaders, so I want to continue that, the struggle of my people. (P5)*

**Factors that hinder and facilitate retention in the university**

When reporting their academic experience, many participants mentioned difficulties related to the process of adapting to university life.

*The beginning was the hardest part, because I felt very alone. I did not know anyone, I had no friendships, and I had no contact with other Indigenous people within the university. I think that was the hardest part, being alone. At first, I came with my mother, but after about two months she left and I felt even more lost. (P2)*

*Getting into the university was actually easy, but staying was difficult, because there are many issues.*

*You need financial stability, you have to dedicate practically twenty-four hours to the program, and then there is the family, the child who needs attention, so that part was a little more complicated. (P11)*

Among the factors that favor retention in the university, financial support from government student assistance programs stood out, as well as the support offered by CUIA and the support of family, the Indigenous community, and classmates.

*First of all, I receive the permanence assistance that we get from the government to cover expenses here in the city, such as food, housing, and similar needs. There are also the four professors from different departments who work with CUIA, who make themselves available both pedagogically and didactically. And, of course, there are the friendships we build in the program. (P1)*

*[...] What helps me stay here is really the struggle of my people, which I want to continue. (P5)*

Among the aspects that hinder retention, participants mentioned distance from family, episodes of prejudice, and language barriers. Participants reported difficulties in following academic activities due to the predominance of the Portuguese language in the university environment, since in their communities everyday communication occurs mostly in Indigenous languages.

*What makes it difficult is the prejudice they have against Indigenous people. We feel excluded, because they think we are inferior. Not everyone, I will not generalize, but there are people who look at us and think: what are these Indigenous people doing here, they should be out there in the forest, this place is not for Indigenous people. (P5)*

*I went through many difficulties because of my language. I speak my mother tongue, so I had many difficulties understanding some things. I gradually got used to it. I learned by myself, I had to keep studying on my own. (P10)*

Despite the reported difficulties, participants showed strong motivation to remain in their programs. Overall, they stated that they would only drop out under extreme circumstances, such as the occurrence of a fatal event involving family members. However, they mentioned that losing student financial aid or experiencing physical or mental health problems could compromise the continuation of their education. Only one participant reported the desire to drop out due to difficulties adapting to the university environment.

*For me to drop out of the program, something like a fatal event with my family would have to happen, or if my mental health reached its limit. But as long as it is still possible to deal with things, I will not give up. (P1)*

*I think it is a psychological issue, because at least in my mind there have been many moments when I thought about just dropping everything and leaving, because maybe it would be easier, I do not know. But we gather strength to stay. I try to talk with the professors from CUIA, and with other Indigenous students as well. So we always support each other, but I believe that if I were to give up, it would probably be because of psychological issues. (P2)*

*For me, the only way I would drop out is if they stopped the scholarship, because there would be no way for me to support myself. (P7)*

### **Belonging and welcoming: institutional support for indigenous students**

Participants mentioned different forms of institutional support offered by the university, including financial aid such as the permanence allowance and food assistance, in addition to psychological, pedagogical, and social support.

*The university provides the permanence scholarship, which is equivalent to one minimum wage, and food assistance, because we can eat at the university restaurant without paying the five reais fee. Every day we sign a list and can have lunch and dinner. In addition, we have CUIA, which is a university commission that supports Indigenous students. The four professors follow our academic journey here. If we have any difficulty, they can give a support class if it is in their area, and if it is not, they can negotiate with other departments to arrange a support class or tutoring. This already helps a lot. (P8)*

*We receive the permanence scholarship from the university. There is also transportation, but that is provided by the municipality for all students. We also have postgraduate opportunities, because sometimes in the master's program there is a specific place reserved for Indigenous students within the university. (P2)*

Despite recognition of these initiatives, participants reported that institutional support is still limited in some sectors of the university, especially within program coordination offices. Overall, CUIA was identified as the main source of support for Indigenous students. Only three participants positively evaluated the support received from the coordination of their programs.

*I think the program coordination, although it is a department that respects us and receives us well, still leaves something to be desired because they see us as students who do not have their own culture or traditions. It is as if we were students who had all the preparation beforehand to enter university. I think they should have a more focused view on the real difficulties that Indigenous students face within the program. (P1)*

*Usually, when we present some kind of difficulty,*

*you have to go after help yourself. Sometimes you need assistance, so you go there and talk about your situation, and they come here to help. But at least for me it is not something very present. It is not something that I knew I could ask for, for example, help. Generally, when we have problems or difficulties, we talk to the professors from CUIA.* (P2)

*Until now, no one in my program has asked me if everything is okay.* (P12)

As suggestions for improvement, participants emphasized the need to strengthen student support, specifically through the promotion of academic equity that considers weaknesses in the study process and difficulties related to the Portuguese language. They also pointed out the importance of developing actions directed at Indigenous students (such as events and movements) aimed at valuing Indigenous culture and reducing prejudice. In addition, they highlighted the need to build student housing and create a space where Indigenous students can gather outside the library.

*One of the things I always discuss with the CUIA professors is that we need a space here inside the university where we can gather and hold our meetings, say our prayers, sing our songs, and continue our culture here outside our territory. Because when we leave the Indigenous land, we lose some of that, since things are different here. We cannot practice the same traditions that we do in the village. Everything is very different here. So, we should have a space to recover this, to meet and show our culture, hold conversation circles among relatives, and strengthen ourselves here within the university.* (P5)

*With the changes, there should really be this sense of welcoming, recognizing us, not just showing us on screens and media and saying, "we have Indigenous students," or boasting about it. It is not about taking someone by the hand and then letting go and leaving things as they are. In reality, that is negligence; so, I think that is it.* (P4)

When asked about the feelings experienced at the university, responses ranged from positive perceptions such as happiness, well-being, and a sense of welcome to negative feelings such as loneliness, sadness, and a sense of being lost.

*It is difficult, of course, but at the same time it is rewarding, because I know this is an important space for an Indigenous person to be in. Everything I do here is thinking that one day I will be able to give something back to our home and to our struggle through education, taking everything I learned here back to the village.* (P2)

*Sometimes I feel a bit lost. I am a very outgoing person, I talk to everyone. But no matter how much*

*I try to fit in, to fit into the box of non-Indigenous people, it does not work because of customs. Sometimes it is the way of speaking that sounds a bit different, sometimes it is the Portuguese language, or even religion here outside, because religion here is very strongly defined [...].* (P8)

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm that the difficulties faced by Indigenous students in accessing, remaining in, and completing higher education are multidimensional in nature, involving socioeconomic, cultural, pedagogical, linguistic, and emotional aspects, corroborating findings from previous research<sup>(14)</sup>. However, the results indicate that these challenges are not limited to individual or socioeconomic conditions but are also related to the way higher education is structured, organized, and operationalized, which may hinder both the learning process and the retention of these students in the university.

The expansion of access to higher education through the Affirmative Action Policy has proven decisive for the admission of Indigenous students, since more than 80% of them enter university through quotas or reserved seats, as evidenced by research conducted with 24 Indigenous students studying Medicine at different federal universities across the country<sup>(15)</sup>. However, the results of the present study reinforce that access alone does not guarantee effective conditions for retention and completion of the program. Retention policies thus assume a central role in the Indigenous academic trajectory<sup>(15)</sup>, being fundamental to mitigate historical and structural inequalities.

In the present study, financial insecurity and housing-related difficulties emerged as important challenges for the retention of Indigenous students, an aspect also identified in research that pointed to the impact of the high cost of living faced by these students when relocating from their communities of origin to urban centers<sup>(16)</sup>. The Bolsa Permanência program, established in 2013, by providing financial assistance to students in situations of vulnerability, especially Indigenous and Quilombola students, plays a fundamental role in the continuity of studies, contributing to reducing dropout rates and enabling the completion of undergraduate programs<sup>(15)</sup>. However, as pointed out by the participants, the amount of the benefit is insufficient to fully cover basic expenses, generating recurring situations of vulnerability and insecurity, which increases the risk of dropout.

In addition to financial limitations, adaptation to the university environment represents another relevant challenge. Students reported difficulties remaining in urban and academic settings marked by logics, routines, and demands different from those experienced in their communities of origin. This situation occurs particularly when students are linked to institutions that do not have structured student support programs<sup>(16)</sup>. This reality was also reflected in the present study, since most participants reported difficulties maintaining fixed housing in the municipality where the university is located, even while receiving food assistance, transportation benefits, and Bolsa Permanência. This scenario demonstrates that such policies, although

essential, are not sufficient to ensure adequate conditions for retention.

Another relevant aspect concerns adaptation to the program and the academic routine required, which may lead to changes in academic programs during the university trajectory. Although migration to highly competitive programs is commonly observed, among the 13 participants in this study, eight reported having changed programs at least once. This finding indicates, on the one hand, that the initial choice does not always remain viable when faced with academic demands and the difficulties encountered, and on the other hand, the relative ease that these students have, at least in the institution studied, in moving between programs.

Family, community, and social support proved to be fundamental factors both for admission to and retention in the university among Indigenous students. Participants highlighted that bonds with family members, the Indigenous community, and other Indigenous students constitute important sources of motivation, emotional strengthening, and collective meaning in the educational journey. Considering the role of family and community support in admission and retention may contribute to improving institutional welcoming actions, since strategies that value collective bonds tend to strengthen the sense of belonging and adaptation to the university environment. Studies indicate that self-identification as an Indigenous student and the sense of belonging are strongly associated with family and community ties<sup>(3)</sup>.

In addition to socioeconomic issues, the results also pointed to pedagogical and linguistic challenges. Difficulties related to prior educational background and mastery of the Portuguese language reveal structural gaps in earlier schooling and indicate weaknesses in the institutional support offered in higher education beyond the role of CUIA. The reports suggest that institutional expectations of linguistic and academic homogeneity disregard educational trajectories shaped by intercultural contexts, producing learning difficulties, low academic performance, and feelings of inadequacy.

These findings point to the need to rethink pedagogical practices in higher education, incorporating strategies such as teaching methodologies sensitive to cultural diversity, flexibility in academic deadlines, formative assessment, and continuous pedagogical monitoring. Strategies of this nature not only favor retention but also contribute to more meaningful learning and to the appreciation of different forms of knowledge. Learning difficulties and low academic performance among these students, resulting in part from deficiencies in prior education and weaknesses in individualized academic support, have also been identified in studies conducted with Indigenous students enrolled in Medicine programs at federal institutions<sup>(15)</sup>. Prior research also highlights the need for specific pedagogical actions, such as reading and writing courses, tutoring programs, intercultural welcoming initiatives, and strategies to reduce processes of exclusion, dropout, and prejudice<sup>(10)</sup>.

With regard to retention, at the institution studied Indigenous students benefit both from the support provided by CUIA and from internal regulations that ensure differentiated assistance tailored to their specific needs<sup>(17)</sup>. However,

participants pointed out weaknesses in the monitoring offered, particularly by program coordinations, which do not always recognize their cultural specificities and distinct educational trajectories<sup>(15)</sup>.

Interestingly, beyond financial and pedagogical support, none of the participants referred to other policies implemented by the university aimed at promoting retention and completion of programs by Indigenous students. These policies include greater flexibility in the maximum time allowed for program completion and regulations that allow program changes, including to highly competitive programs, conditions that are significantly more flexible than those offered to non-Indigenous students. This reality can be observed when considering that among the 13 participants in the study, eight had already changed programs at least once.

Prejudice and exclusion experienced by Indigenous students also emerged as factors that hinder retention in the university, often associated with dropout processes, particularly among those who enter higher education without adequate preparation for university life. Although universities have historically adopted exclusionary positions, and despite the advances resulting from affirmative action policies, Indigenous students are still frequently confronted with the need to adapt to hegemonic academic values, norms, and cultures<sup>(18)</sup>. This requirement favors the persistence of prejudice in the university environment, often characterized by hostility toward students admitted through quotas and affirmative action and by rejection of Indigenous presence in academic spaces, revealing intolerance toward other cultures and forms of knowledge<sup>(16)</sup>.

A study conducted at Universidade Estadual de Campinas with students participating in the Ayurí project, which promotes discussion circles among Indigenous students, identified the presence of feelings of incapacity, difficulty dealing with anxiety, isolation, and suicidal ideation<sup>(19)</sup>. Similarly, research conducted with 14 Indigenous university students in Canada identified high levels of depression and anxiety resulting from overlapping challenges such as academic pressure, family responsibilities, prejudice, discrimination, and the persistent consequences of colonialism<sup>(20)</sup>. Such evidence reinforces the importance of actions focused on mental health in order to promote both retention and academic performance among these students<sup>(19)</sup>.

By highlighting the complex articulation between socioeconomic, pedagogical, cultural, and emotional challenges, this study contributes to the scientific debate by demonstrating that the retention of Indigenous students in higher education depends on integrated institutional actions that go beyond access and financial support. The results reinforce the need to understand the university as a space that must adapt to the diversity of the people it welcomes, incorporating intercultural pedagogical practices, retention policies aligned with teaching practices, and institutional actions committed to equity and educational justice in Brazilian higher education.

As possible limitations, the fact that the study was conducted in a single higher education institution stands out, which may restrict the applicability of the findings to other university contexts. In addition, the use of the snowball sampling technique may have influenced the com-

position of the participant group, favoring the inclusion of students with close contact networks and possibly similar experiences. Although these aspects do not compromise the depth of the qualitative analysis, they indicate the need for caution when generalizing the results.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the retention of Indigenous students in higher education is sustained by a complex articulation between family and community support, institutional retention policies, and pedagogical practices sensitive to cultural diversity. Support from family and community proved to be a structuring element in the academic trajectory, strengthening the sense of belonging, Indigenous identity, and the collective commitment to higher education.

Although institutional programs such as Bolsa Permanência, food assistance, and support provided by CUIA are fundamental to reducing vulnerabilities, their effectiveness is limited when not accompanied by integrated pedagogical and academic actions. Weaknesses in institutional welcoming, particularly within program coordinations, indicate the need to expand pedagogical monitoring and promote greater collective responsibility within the university for the retention of these students.

By contributing to the debate on equity in higher education, this study reinforces that the retention of Indigenous

students does not depend exclusively on access or financial support, but on the construction of intercultural, inclusive academic environments attentive to the pedagogical, linguistic, and emotional dimensions of these students.

Higher education institutions should expand and integrate their retention policies by investing in faculty training and the creation of intercultural spaces for interaction. They should also develop initiatives aimed at promoting well-being and mental health.

Future research should include multiple higher education institutions and adopt sampling strategies that favor greater sociocultural and academic diversity among participants. The incorporation of different methodological approaches, such as data triangulation, may contribute to increasing the analytical depth and robustness of interpretations, deepening the understanding of the factors that influence more equitable and successful academic trajectories among Indigenous students.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## FUNDING

This study was supported by Fundação Araucária through an Undergraduate Research Scholarship - Affirmative Actions.

## REFERENCES

1. Anjos RC. Políticas afirmativas: igualdade formal e material. *Ciencia Atual* [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2023 Apr 15];16(2):29-48. Available from: <https://revista.saojose.br/index.php/cafsj/article/view/509>.
2. Brasil. Lei nº 12.711, de 29 de agosto de 2012. Dispõe sobre o ingresso nas universidades federais e nas instituições federais de ensino técnico de nível médio e das outras providências [Internet]. Brasília: Presidência da República; 2012 [cited 2023 Apr 15]. Available from: [https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/\\_ato2011-2014/2012/lei/l12711.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2011-2014/2012/lei/l12711.htm).
3. Amaral WR, Fraga L, Rodrigues IC, organizadores. Universidade para indígenas: a experiência do Paraná [Internet]. vol. 8. Rio de Janeiro: FLACSO, GEA; UERJ, LPP; 2016 [cited 2023 Apr 16]. Available from: [https://flacso.org.br/files/2016/09/Universidade-para-Indigenas-GEA-Estudos\\_8-web.pdf](https://flacso.org.br/files/2016/09/Universidade-para-Indigenas-GEA-Estudos_8-web.pdf).
4. Ayres AD, Brando F da R, Ayres OM. Presença indígena na universidade como retomada de território. *Rev. Bras. Educ.* 2023;28:e280060. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s1413-24782023280060>.
5. Dietz G, Cortés LSM. Towards a Higher Education System for Indigenous Students? Intercultural universities in Mexico. *Educ. Real.* 2021;46(4):e116232. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2175-6236116232>.
6. Amaral WR. As trajetórias dos estudantes indígenas nas universidades estaduais do Paraná: sujeitos e pertencimentos [doctoral thesis on the internet]. Curitiba: Universidade Federal do Paraná; 2010 [cited 2023 Apr 16]. Available from: <https://acervodigital.ufpr.br/handle/1884/23999>.
7. Romani M, Mello CM, Silva DR, Silva MAR da. Permanência e desafios das acadêmicas indígenas de uma universidade pública do Paraná. *Cad. Pedagógico.* 2025;22(6):e15389. <https://doi.org/10.54033/cadpedv22n6-063>.
8. Pinto FMC, Pinto GC. Os avanços e os desafios da educação escolar indígena no Brasil. *Revista Tecnica.* 2025;9(2):e90021. <https://doi.org/10.56762/tecnica.v9i2.1905>.
9. Faustino RC, Novak MSJ, Rodrigues IC. O acesso de mulheres indígenas a universidade: trajetórias de lutas, estudos e conquistas. *TempArg.* 2020;12(29):e0103. <https://doi.org/10.5965/2175180312292020e0103>.
10. Franco LC, Silva MHR da, Ferreira TDV. Povos indígenas e a universidade: revisão integrativa. *Destaques Acadêmicos.* 2021;13(2):43-52. <https://doi.org/10.22410/issn.2176-3070.v13i2a2021.2797>.
11. Leighton K, Kardong-Edgren S, Schneidereith T, Foisy-Doll C. Using social media and snowball sampling as an alternative recruitment strategy for research. *Clin Simul Nurs.* 2021;55:37-42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cns.2021.03.006>.
12. Rahimi S, Khatooni M. Saturation in qualitative research: an evolutionary concept analysis. *Int J Nurs Stud Adv.* 2024;6:100174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnasa.2024.100174>. PMID: 38746797.
13. Bardin L. *Análise de conteúdo*. São Paulo: Edições 70; 2020.
14. Caccia JD, Domingues E. The permanence of indige-

- nous students at the university: what is the role of psychology?. *Psicol. Esc. Educ.* 2024;28:e259789. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2175-35392024-259789-T>.
15. Luna WF, Teixeira KC, Lima GK. Access and retention policies for indigenous people in Brazilian federal medical schools: mapping and experiences. *Interface (Botucatu)*. 2021;25:e200621. <https://doi.org/10.1590/interface.200621>.
  16. Luciano GY dos S, Amaral WR do. Povos indigenas e educacao superior no Brasil e no Parana: desafios e perspectivas. *Integr. conoc. (En linea) [Internet]*. 2021 [cited 2025 Aug 21];10(2):13-37. Available from: <https://revistas.unc.edu.ar/index.php/integracionyconocimiento/article/view/34069/34532>.
  17. Burci TVL, Costa MLF. A Inclusao Educacional dos povos indigenas pelo Ensino Superior a Distancia: a contribuicao da tecnologia para a democratizacao da Educacao. *Rev. FAEEBA (Impr.)*. 2021;30(64):141-57. <https://doi.org/10.21879/faeeba2358-0194.2021.v30.n64.p141-157>.
  18. Silva VM da, Vergolino EB. Os preconceitos vivenciados pelos alunos indigenas nas universidades. *Ouricuri*. 2020;10(1):31-5. <https://doi.org/10.59360/ouricuri.vo110.i1.a9098>.
  19. Assis ES, Goncalves LP, Rodrigues FH, Vilharva KN, Barros NF. Challenges of Indigenous Psychology in providing assistance to university students. *Estud. psicol. (Campinas)*. 2024;41:e230095. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-0275202441e230095en>.
  20. Beshai S, Desjarlais SM, Green B. Perspectives of indigenous University Students in Canada on mindfulness-based interventions and their adaptation to reduce depression and anxiety symptoms. *Mindfulness (N Y)*. 2023;14(3):538-53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-023-02087-7>. PMID: 36845644.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Study conception: Marcon SS, Izepato AFS.

Data collection: Izepato AFS.

Data analysis: Izepato AFS, Logullo VV, Mendes AH, Balestre ME.

Data interpretation: Izepato AFS, Logullo VV, Mendes AH, Balestre ME, Teston EF, Marcon SS.

All authors are responsible for the textual preparation and critical revision of the intellectual content, for the final published version, and for all ethical, legal, and scientific aspects related to the accuracy and integrity of the study.



Copyright © 2026 Online Brazilian Journal of Nursing

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.