

The trajectory of *quilombola* students in higher education

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Abstract

The article summarized here presents the results of qualitative research conducted in 2019 on *quilombola* students accepted to the State University of Southwestern Bahia (Universidade Estadual do Sudoeste da Bahia – UESB) under a system of supplementary quotas.^a

Keywords: Affirmative action policies, higher education, quilombolas, identity.

Q*uilombolas* are residents of *quilombos*, traditional Afro-Brazilian, and generally rural, communities, which generally originated either from settlements of escaped slaves, from groups of freedpeople who received land donated by former masters (often when slaveowners died without heirs), or from families of freed people who bought or occupied land in the post-emancipation period. *Quilombolas* have long suffered violence and discrimination from both large landowners and the State, and many such communities have lost most of their land through various combinations of violence and legal trickery by neighboring landowners.

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^a Translated by Karl Monsma.

Several institutions of higher education in Brazil, following the strategy 12.13 of goal 12 in the National Education Plan¹, have implemented affirmative action policies to guarantee access and facilitate the academic success of groups that historically have been excluded from higher education. According to this strategy, by 2024 the expansion of Brazilian higher education should guarantee “service to rural populations as well as indigenous and *quilombola* communities, with regard to access, retention, conclusion and graduation of professionals who can then practice among these populations” (Brasil, 2014).

In 2008, the UESB approved resolution 37, which instituted a system of reserved affirmative action positions in undergraduate courses of study, as well as additional quotas for indigenous people, *quilombolas* and people with disabilities. With this initiative, the UESB, a state university, preceded many federal institutions of higher education, which only implemented affirmative action quotas they were required to by the Federal Law 12.711, of 2012.

These policies, considered social reparations strategies, are a response to restricted and segregated access to higher education. However, the increase in the number of students that accompanied university expansion was not sufficient in itself to break with the predetermined cursus identified by Bourdieu (1998), in which the same people historically barred from access to the university are also, when they are accepted, the first to drop out.

We used qualitative research methods (Bogdan; Biklen, 1994) to study the implementation and results of these policies. We used legal and literary sources to describe aspects of *quilombola* history, and we used documents from the archives of the UESB administration study acceptance, permanence

¹This is a ten-year plan for Brazilian education at all levels. The current plan came into force in 2014 and is comprised of 20 goals and 254 strategies, which should be implemented over the ten year period. Goal number 12 in this plan is to “raise the gross enrollment rate in higher education to 50%, and the net rate to 33%, of the population between 18 and 24 years of age, while assuring the quality of educational offerings and expansion of public higher education to at least 40% of all new enrollments in higher education” (Brasil, 2014). Editor: The emphasis on expansion of public institutions is due to the facts that they are free of charge and, with rare exceptions, provide education of much higher quality than private institutions.

and graduation of *quilombolas* students in the undergraduate courses of study offered by the institution.² At the same time, it was possible to learn, from institutional rules, the thinking of the UESB administration with regard to the rights and guarantees of *quilombolas*.

It is important to note that UESB defines itself as a multicampus public university, with a central campus in the city of Vitória da Conquista and two other campuses in Jequié and Itapetinga. The university offers 47 undergraduate courses of study, in three different time periods (morning, afternoon and night), at two different degree levels (25 leading to bachelor's degrees, and 22 *licenciaturas*, courses leading to teaching certificates). The university also offers graduate programs and carries out extension work, thus contributing to several aspects of social development in the territories around the three campuses, as well as the northern region of the neighboring state of Minas Gerais.

Of the 17,370 students entering the UESB from 2009 to 2017, only 253 entered by way of the supplementary quotas for residents of *quilombo* communities certified by the Palmares Cultural Foundation, which provides official recognition of these communities. The research led to the following conclusions:

1. The university offered a moderate number of places, but only some of them were occupied, so over this period of almost a decade about half of the places reserved for *quilombolas* were not occupied.

2. In addition to the insufficient number of *quilombola* candidates for some courses of study, those places for which qualified *quilombola* candidates do exist are often occupied by non-*quilombola* candidates who fraudulently claim to be *quilombolas*. The majority of the fraudulently occupied places are in elite areas such as Medicine, Law or Dentistry. The fraudulent candidates take advantage of the invisibility of *quilombolas* to usurp their rights, thus denying them opportunities for social mobility and the possibility to change a history marked by isolation, abandonment, prejudice, racism and discrimination.

²Editor: In Brazil, students are accepted directly to specific courses of study, and the degree of competition for admission varies greatly between courses.

3. On all three campuses, the number of *quilombolas* dropping out is larger than the number graduating, which suggests the need for revision of retention policies. Granting access to the university is not enough in itself to guarantee the graduation of people who have historically been denied the rights essential to survival and human dignity, because socioeconomic factors often limit the academic success of these students.

4. Elite courses of study are among those with the largest numbers of entering *quilombo* students, which shows the desire and capacity of these students to occupy spaces from which they historically have been excluded. At the same time, *quilombolas* are also particularly likely to enter courses oriented toward agriculture and cultivation, such as Agronomy and Forest Engineering, or toward animal husbandry, such as Zootechnics, which demonstrates their desire to contribute to economic activities in their home communities based on the land and its resources.

To comprehend the construction of *quilombola* identities, in addition to consulting legal norms, such as the federal constitution of 1988 and Decree 4,887, of 2003, this research is based on the work of several theorists, including Arruti (2006), Azeredo (1987), Castells (1999), Gomes (2006), Leite (2000), Little (2002), Moura (1987) and O'Dwyer (2002). These authors allow one to understand that defining oneself as *quilombola* is a form of identity consciousness, and that only the *quilombola* people, conscious of their identity, have the power, recognized in the set of norms guiding the Palmares Cultural Foundation, to declare themselves to be *quilombolas*.

In conclusion, this study constitutes a contribution to the evaluation of policies implemented by Brazilian higher education institutions to favor access, retention and graduation of *quilombola* students. The data show that, even though they are still underrepresented, the presence of excluded groups in spaces that traditionally were not "theirs" represents the beginning of a change in stereotypes and the possibility of a new social imaginary about *quilombola* peoples in Brazil.

Publication summarized

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