

Aid policies promote permanence in undergraduate studies for students with disabilities

Elisa Hanzon / 7 de dezembro de 2022 / In English



Inclusion | Since the beginning of this year, assistance for the purchase of assistive technology equipment and for access to accessible transportation enhances the performance of students in academic activities

By Elisa Hanzon
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Photo: Fábio Dutra/JU - Marize Lorenz, Incluir employee

"I am Jessica Teixeira Gomes, I am 31 years old, I was born with a physical disability called Arthrogyrosis multiplex congenita. I am quadriplegic and I use a wheelchair." This is how the Psychology student from UFRGS introduces herself in an interview to the JU, via written message on WhatsApp. "I have little mobility in my arms and legs. I use my mouth to write, to use my cell phone... but I don't see this as an obstacle. I can live as well as any other person without disabilities. Of course, I need help for almost everything," she explains.

Gomes was admitted in the 2020/1 entrance exam - UFRGS Vestibular - and started studying in the same semester at UFRGS. Since the beginning, she has been served by the PRAE Benefit Program, using the RU (University Restaurant) and, later, during the pandemic, receiving emergency food and internet assistance. However, the **creation of the Assistive Technology aid** - paid in a single installment to buy equipment - and the Accessible Transportation aid - paid monthly since the first semester of this year was decisive for the student to continue her studies.

"Aid holds immense significance for students with limited financial resources, particularly during the pandemic when it proved to be a valuable support at home. Now the funded transportation program is essential for me, because I currently live in Guaíba and I couldn't afford to pay for transportation to take me to the campus. Relying solely on bus transportation, my daily commute would be difficult and tiring."
— Jessica Teixeira Gomes

With the R\$ 1.000 (US\$206) scholarship from the Accessible Transportation, Gomes can go once a week to the University to take one class - out of the four or five that are usually taken per semester. Since the adapted cabs charge R\$280 (US\$7,86) per day, she still needs to add R\$120 (US\$24,80) to the amount at the end of each month. "Unfortunately, the money is not enough, so I had to cut down on the number of classes. If I went to the University every day, it would be way over my budget, and I can't afford to pay more," she says. The aid, however, came at a good time and has been fundamental for not interrupting a dream that started when I passed the *Vestibular* and entered UFRGS: "It was a great victory, because many people did not believe I had the capacity to achieve this. My physical disability never stopped me from pursuing my goals," she says.

The creation of the aid program by PRAE means an advance in the promotion of the permanence of students with disabilities in the University. The coordinator of the **Incluir** (UFRGS' inclusion and accessibility center), Adriana Maria Arioli, highlights the importance of the initiative and states that, many times, mobility in the cities does not meet our expectations in terms of accessibility, which compromises the right of some students with disabilities.

"We know that public transportation does not always offer accessible vehicles at all times, so an alternative is needed for students with some mobility impediment."
— Adriana Arioli

Likewise, some assistive technologies are expensive and directly related to and dependent on the possibility of performing academic activities. Arioli evaluates that the aid contributes for these students' performance to be enhanced.



On the cover page and in the image above, Jessica Teixeira Gomes, Psychology student. A resident of Guaíba, she says that, with the return of in-person classes, the PRAE aid is essential for her to be able to commute from the neighboring city she lives in to Porto Alegre (Photo: Fábio Dutra/JU)

Aid list
PRAE's Benefits Program, provided by the National Student Assistance Program - PNAES, is aimed at students in a state of socioeconomic vulnerability and people with disabilities so that they have the support to perform their academic activities and to complete their undergraduate studies. There are, currently, eight types of aid: food, transportation, housing, digital inclusion, health program, pedagogical support (teaching material aid, scholarships and academic support), social support and support to people with disabilities. In total, 3.458 students are aided by the program, representing 10.97% of the total number of undergraduate students.

The Executive Vice-President for Student Assistance at UFRGS, Ludymila Barroso Mallmann, says that the aid for people with disabilities is a recent innovation, being one more way to support students in their undergraduate trajectory.

"I believe that the big impact is to provide support during the academic life beyond just creating specific vacancies for admission to the University"
— Ludymila Mallmann

According to the Executive Vice-President, the aid was created to be permanent, "however, like all other aids, it always depends on the Annual Budget Law. Thus, we have guaranteed the resource for 2022/2 and, if the Draft Annual Budget Law 2023 is confirmed, the resource for all of 2023 will be guaranteed".

For Arioli, when a student with disability enters the University, regardless of the admission status - whether through reserved or ample competition - there is an institutional responsibility to serve them with specific conditions aiming for equity. "We achieve this by making available accessibility resources for this public, understanding accessibility in its different dimensions, including the methodological and attitudinal ones," she explains.

In addition, it is sought to provide ample assistance so that inclusion and accessibility permeate all sectors and players in the university community, sharing responsibilities. "We still don't have an institutional policy built and registered, but we have *Incluir*, which articulates with the several sectors of the University to create and promote inclusion, accessibility, and permanence strategies for students with disabilities," Arioli ponders.

A UFRGS employee since 2015, Marize Lorenz, is visually impaired and works for *Incluir* as a member of the **Adriana Thoma Collective of People with Disabilities**. She has been following the changes throughout this period and reinforces that there is still much to be done, especially in relation to people's attitudes. "Many people look and say: 'Bah, but do I need to change the whole structure of a classroom because of one person? Unfortunately, the consolidation of a project like this takes a long time to change attitudes and cultures, unlike other projects that have a well-defined deadline to start and finish,'" she says. "The scholarships," she observes, "help a lot because most students, like Gomes, are low-income and need help to stay studying."



Marize Lorenz, an *Incluir* employee (Photo: Fábio Dutra/JU)

Inclusion
Law 13.409/2016, which instituted the reserve of vacancies in higher education also for people with disabilities, and the **Lei de Cotas (Quotas Law)**, passed in 2012, generated an increase in the admission of this public in universities. Long before that, since the 1980's, the social movements of people with disabilities had been seeking their rights as citizens, escaping from the stigmas of charity and exceptionalism, points out the coordinator of *Incluir*. "Today we have the Brazilian Inclusion Law, the result of an ample democratic debate made by several instances of representation of people with disabilities in the legislative branch, which shows the capacity of articulation of these movements," she analyzes.

Arioli also says that another bias of analysis can be considered, based on the figures from the last Higher Education Census, which show that only 0.6% of the enrollments are of students with disabilities. "Getting into higher education depends on the conditions related to inclusion and accessibility offered in Basic Education, sometimes neglected due to lack of investments. Because, otherwise, it is not enough for education to be a right for everyone," he observes. According to the 2010 Census, 61.1% of people with disabilities aged 15 or more had no schooling or only incomplete elementary schooling. According to the coordinator of *Incluir*, since then there has been no significant improvement in these rates, but there has been an increase in the schooling of people with disabilities at several levels.

"The numbers can show better results if the inclusion policies implemented since 2000 are made effective, not forgetting that this is an analysis of multiple contexts, including the economic and the political."
— Adriana Arioli

Another point to move barriers in this area would be the shift to the concept 'social model' of disability - to the detriment of the clinical model, which focuses only on the biological conditions of the subject. "The latter understanding ended up generating discourses of incapacity, abnormality, and deviation from the standard considered 'normal' for the human being, because disability is only seen as a lack, a lack in the body. We moved in conceptual terms, and this learning is collective and can lead to changes in attitudes," believes the coordinator of *Incluir*.

Translated into English by **Rafaela Alexandre de Oliveira**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training I (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari R. Becker (Ph.D.) - IUUFRGS.

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