



# Barriers to and facilitators of permanence in an evening Dentistry course at a public university in southern Brazil


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**Abstract** This study analyzed the permanence conditions and the sociodemographic-family profile of students of the evening Dentistry course offered by a Public University in southern Brazil. It used data from a cross-sectional observational survey carried out through self-completion of an online instrument. All 175 students enrolled in the evening course in the first semester of 2019 were invited to participate in the study. Closed questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics and open questions were interpreted using thematic content analysis. A total of 55 students participated in the research. Most of them were women, aged between 25 and 35 years, white, single, without children, resident in the city where the Institution is located, and who attended primary and secondary education in public schools. In addition, 50.9% work but depend on family support for their livelihood, and 63.6% have an individual monthly income of up to 2 minimum salaries. The barriers associated with student's permanence in the course were financial issues, organizational aspects of the University/course, the condition of being a working student, teachers' familiarization with the profile of evening students, security around the campus, and course duration. Financial aid for the purchase of dental materials was recognized as a facilitating strategy for permanence in the course. Students recommend, as strategies to strengthen permanence, the flexibility of curriculum prerequisites and arrival times in classes, attending disciplines in the day period, distance education disciplines/activities, a greater offer of extracurricular activities on days/times that take into account the working student, and psychological follow-up. The evening course has enabled working students to access higher education in Dentistry. Barriers to and facilitators of permanence were identified and must be permanently analyzed.

**Descriptors:** Education, Dental. Students, Dental. Curriculum.

## Barreras y facilitadores de la permanencia en un curso nocturno de Odontología en una universidad pública del sur de Brasil

**Resumen** Este estudio analizó las condiciones de permanencia y el perfil sociodemográfico-familiar de estudiantes del curso nocturno de Odontología, en una Universidad Pública del sur de Brasil. Utilizó datos de una encuesta observacional transversal, realizada por auto-completado de un instrumento en línea. Todos los 175 estudiantes matriculados en el curso vespertino, primer semestre de 2019, fueron invitados a participar en el estudio. Las preguntas cerradas se analizaron mediante estadística descriptiva y las preguntas abiertas mediante análisis de contenido temático. Participaron en la investigación 55 estudiantes. En su mayoría eran mujeres, entre 25 y 35 años, blancas, solteras, sin hijos, residentes en la ciudad donde se encuentra la Institución y que habían cursado estudios primarios y secundarios en una escuela pública; 50,9% trabaja, pero depende del apoyo familiar para su sustento y el 63,6% tiene un ingreso mensual individual de hasta 2 salarios mínimos. Las barreras asociadas a la permanencia del estudiante en el curso fueron aspectos económicos, aspectos organizativos de la Universidad/course, la condición de estudiante-trabajador, conocimiento de la facultad sobre el perfil de los estudiantes nocturnos, seguridad en los alrededores del campus y duración de la carrera. La ayuda financiera para la compra de materiales dentales fue reconocida como una estrategia facilitadora para la permanencia en el curso. Los estudiantes recomiendan, como estrategias para fortalecer la permanencia, la flexibilización de requisitos y horarios de llegada a clases, seguimiento de asignaturas en turno diurno, asignaturas/actividades de educación a distancia, mayor oferta de actividades extracurriculares en días/horarios considerando al estudiante-trabajador y seguimiento psicológico. El curso nocturno ha permitido a



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los estudiantes trabajadores acceder a la educación superior en Odontología. Se identificaron barreras y facilitadores de la permanencia y deben ser permanentemente analizados.

**Descritores:** Educación en Odontología. Estudiantes de Odontología. Currículum.

### **Barreiras e facilitadores da permanência em curso noturno de Odontologia de universidade pública do sul do Brasil**

**Resumo** Este estudo analisou as condições de permanência e o perfil sociodemográfico-familiar de estudantes do curso noturno de Odontologia, em Universidade Pública do sul do Brasil. Utilizou dados de pesquisa observacional transversal, realizada pelo autopreenchimento de instrumento online. Todos os 175 estudantes matriculados no curso noturno, primeiro semestre de 2019, foram convidados a participar do estudo. As questões fechadas foram analisadas pela estatística descritiva e as abertas pela análise temática de conteúdo. Participaram da pesquisa 55 estudantes. Em sua maioria, eram mulheres, de 25 a 35 anos, brancas, solteiras, sem filhos, residentes na cidade em que se localiza a Instituição e cursaram ensino fundamental e médio em escola pública; 50,9% trabalham, mas dependem de apoio familiar para seu sustento e 63,6% possuem renda individual mensal de até 2 salários mínimos. As barreiras associadas à permanência do estudante no curso foram questões financeiras, aspectos organizacionais da Universidade/curso, a condição de ser estudante-trabalhador, conhecimento do corpo docente sobre o perfil dos estudantes do noturno, segurança em torno do campus e tempo de duração do curso. O auxílio financeiro para compra de materiais odontológicos foi reconhecido como estratégia facilitadora da permanência no curso. Estudantes recomendam como estratégias para fortalecer a permanência, a flexibilização de pré-requisitos e horários de chegada nas aulas, acompanhamento de disciplinas no turno diurno, disciplinas/atividades de educação a distância, maior oferta de atividades extracurriculares em dias/horários considerando o estudante-trabalhador e acompanhamento psicológico. O curso noturno tem possibilitado o acesso do estudante trabalhador na educação superior em Odontologia. Barreiras e facilitadores da permanência foram identificados e devem ser permanentemente analisados.

**Descritores:** Educação em Odontologia. Estudiantes de Odontologia. Currículo.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The education of dentists in Brazil has undergone transformations that involved curricular aspects and the profile of first-year and final-year undergraduate students. This context was facilitated by the implementation of National Curricular Guidelines for Dentistry courses<sup>1</sup> and by changes in the country's health policies, like the inclusion of the oral health team in the Family Health Strategy<sup>2</sup>, and the definition of guidelines in the sphere of the National Oral Health Policy<sup>3</sup>.

In 2007, the Support Program for the Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities (REUNI), one of the actions of the Education Development Plan (PDE), brought to the agenda of discussions/actions the need to amplify student access and permanence in higher education<sup>4</sup>. Federal higher education institutions have adhered to REUNI and, since the beginning of the expansion, 14 universities and more than 100 campuses have been created, which increased the number of seats and enabled the establishment of new undergraduate courses<sup>5</sup>. REUNI has become a strategy to overcome the strong elitism of the Brazilian university, which characterizes higher education as a privileged place for the (re)production of the country's economic elites<sup>6</sup>.

Within this expansion process, the category of working student has emerged, that is, the student who, besides studying, is also inserted in the world of work. This has brought the following issues to the debate: the challenges faced by an individual with a double shift of activities and how the university will adapt to receive this student<sup>7</sup>.

Stimulated by REUNI, the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), a traditional public higher education institution located in the South of Brazil, has amplified, from 2010 onwards, its number of seats by creating the evening Dentistry course. The main objective was to meet the demand of workers who only have the evening period to attend

an undergraduate course<sup>8</sup>. In line with this context of expansion and inclusion, affirmative actions and student permanence policies have increased the number of students from the lower classes in higher education<sup>9-11</sup>, including the Dentistry course<sup>12,13</sup>.

However, the effective democratization of higher education is not restricted to access to seats. It is directly connected with student's permanence in the course until completion. Thus, retention and dropout are relevant issues that need to be considered<sup>8,10,11,12,14</sup>. In light of this, the university must prepare itself to offer seats in the evening period, focusing on the conditions offered to this student, the meaning of studying in the evening and working, and the equalization of educational opportunities offered by the course to the student who works and to the student who does not<sup>14,15</sup>.

The present study aimed to analyze the permanence conditions (barriers and facilitators) of Dentistry students from UFRGS (evening course), as well as the sociodemographic and family profile of these students.

## METHOD

The study is part of a larger cross-sectional observational survey, connected with the Tutorial Education Program (PET) of UFRGS ('Knowledge Connections: Practice Settings and Evening Curricular Internships'), which investigated the profile, conditions and challenges related to the education of students from the evening Dentistry, Psychology, Collective Health, and Social Work courses. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Psychology Institute of this University (CAAE 26126819000005334, Opinion no. 3785026).

In this University, the evening Dentistry course has the same number of hours as the day course (5,055), as well as the same number of credits, curriculum organization, and elective activities. It is different from the day course in terms of duration (day course: 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> semester; evening course: 1<sup>st</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> semester), entrance frequency (day course: every semester; evening course: once a year), and number of seats offered per year (day course: 88; evening course: 30)<sup>12</sup>.

All the 175 students enrolled in the evening Dentistry course of UFRGS in the period from January to June 2019, from all semesters (1<sup>st</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>), were invited to participate in the study (inclusion criterion). Students who were on sick leave or maternity leave were excluded. Participation in the study occurred upon students' voluntary adherence and acceptance.

Data collection was performed through completion of an online instrument containing 21 closed questions and 4 open questions. To develop the instrument, the researchers consulted research instruments employed in studies carried out with Dentistry students from this University<sup>8,14</sup>, and used their own experiences as students and teachers in evening health courses.

Initially, the researchers contacted the coordinators of the Dentistry course to present the research, its objectives and methodology. Upon the coordinators' consent, the course's Undergraduate Commission sent an e-mail to the students containing the invitation to participate in the research, the link to access the online instrument, and the Informed Consent Form (TCLE). Both the instrument and the TCLE were available on the platform Google Forms. A pilot study had been previously conducted with 12 undergraduate students enrolled in evening courses to assess their understanding of the questions and the time needed to complete the instrument. The students gave suggestions regarding the instrument's wording, improving the questions.

The instrument was available online for four months, and completion time was approximately 17 minutes.

The variables related to the sociodemographic and family profile of Dentistry students (evening course) were analyzed, as well as the permanence conditions perceived by them (barriers and facilitators). The variables description includes aspects mobilized by the questions present in the research instrument (Figure 1).

VARIABLES	DESCRIPTION
Students' sociodemographic and family profile	Age (years), gender of identification, race/color, marital status, city of residence, children, primary/secondary education, work, livelihood, if they live with their family, individual monthly income, neighborhood of residence, if they are the first member of the family nucleus to attend higher education
Barriers to permanence	Barriers to student's permanence in the course (organizational aspects of the University/course, student assistance policies, experiences in the course, being a working student)
Facilitators of permanence	Aspects/conditions that facilitate student's permanence in the course (organizational aspects of the University/course, student assistance policies, experiences in the course, being a working student)

**Figure 1.** Variables analyzed in the study.

The quantitative data were analyzed through frequency distribution of each variable (descriptive statistics), using the software SPSS® (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). The qualitative data produced by the open questions of the instrument were interpreted by thematic content analysis<sup>16</sup>, considering the two main themes previously determined in the research instrument - barriers and facilitators of students' permanence in the evening course. The qualitative material was interpreted by the three researchers involved in the study. Initially, they performed a free-floating reading of the text, which enabled them to delve into the content of the answers to the open questions. Then, the material was identified by units of analysis and coded by themes and items of signification<sup>17</sup>, based on the theoretical-methodological perspective of the phenomenology of perception<sup>16</sup> and supported by the study's theoretical framework.

To preserve the secrecy of the participants' identity, numbers were used to code the students (E1 to E55).

## RESULTS

The results are presented in three thematic groups, taking into account the analyzed variables. The first group describes the sociodemographic and family characterization of the study participants. The others express the emerging categories related to barriers that affect permanence in the course and facilitators of students' permanence in the course.

### *Characterization of the study participants*

Of the 175 Dentistry students enrolled in the evening course in the study period, 55 participated in the research (response rate: 31%), and their profile is presented on Table 1. The findings show students aged between 25 and 35 years (61.8%), women (85.5%), white (56.4%), single (83.6%), without children (92.7%), resident in the city where the University is located (81.8%), who had attended primary and secondary education exclusively in public schools (72.7%), and who work (50.9%), although they have the support of the family for their livelihood (50.9%) and still live with the nuclear family (52.7%).

### *Barriers that affect students' permanence in the course*

The students realized that permanence in the evening Dentistry course is affected by different conditions and situations that do not emerge in isolation during their academic trajectory.

They reported financial difficulties to buy mandatory dental materials for the pre-clinic and clinic activities conducted at the University and the need to work so that they can have the conditions to study, buy the materials, and complement the family income.

*Lack of money to buy materials [...]. (E6)*

*[...] the extremely high prices of materials for the Dentistry Clinics. If I don't have them, I can't attend the discipline. (E23)*

**Table 1.** Self-reported profile of the students who participated in the research.

VARIABLES	n	%
<i>Age (years)</i>		
19-24	17	30.9
25-35	34	61.8
36-57	4	7.3
<i>Gender of identification</i>		
Female	47	85.5
Male	8	14.5
<i>Race/color</i>		
White	31	56.4
Brown	17	30.9
Black	7	12.7
<i>Marital status</i>		
Single	46	83.6
Married / Stable union	7	12.8
Divorced / Separated	2	3.6
<i>City of Residence</i>		
Porto Alegre	45	81.8
<i>Children</i>		
Yes	4	7.3
<i>Primary and secondary education</i>		
Private school	14	25.5
Private school with full scholarship	1	1.8
Public school	40	72.7
<i>Is currently working</i>		
Yes	28	50.9
<i>Lives with the family</i>		
Yes	29	52.7
<i>Livelihood</i>		
Has family support	28	50.9
Is primarily responsible	16	29.1
Contributes to family income	9	16.4
Receives financial aid from someone other than a family member	2	3.6
<i>Individual monthly income</i>		
Up to 2 minimum salaries	35	63.6
From 2 to 3 minimum salaries	5	9.1
More than 3 minimum salaries	5	9.1
Did not inform	10	18.2
<i>Neighborhood of residence</i>		
Middle class neighborhood	39	70.9
Upper middle class neighborhood	2	3.6
Peripheral neighborhood (Community/Slum/Village/Popular lot)	14	25.5
<i>First member of the family nucleus to attend a higher education course</i>		
Yes	27	49.1

*The economic issue is also very important, because the materials we need to buy are very expensive. (E11)*

*[...] it's very hard to work all day long, do voluntary work to include in the CV, save money to pay for the materials and help at home. (E17)*

*Financial difficulty [...]. (E29)*

*Difficulty due to the financial situation [...]. (E31)*

*[...] difficulty in having money to pay for the course material. (E23)*

Regarding the organization of the University, lack of access to the services and sectors of the support structure for evening students due to their opening hours - "University Restaurant" (E7, E34), "Dental School Library" (E7, E10, E14, E31, E34, E42, E47), "bar", the area where the university community eats and interacts inside the dental school (E10), "administrative areas like the Undergraduate Commission, Administrative Office, and Management" (E7, E14, E42, E47) – was considered a barrier that hinders permanence in the course.

*I'd like to eat at the University Restaurant more frequently, but in the evening it's closed. Difficulty in using the library because of its opening hours; the same happens with the school's administrative areas, like the Undergraduate Commission. (E7)*

*The library is closed, the bar closes early [...]. (E10)*

*[...] everything is more limited in the evening period, from the cleaning of the premises to the library's opening hours. (E14)*

Working students face increased barriers to access the support structures.

*[...] some school services are not available to the students of the evening Dentistry course, like the library, which closes at 6:30 p.m., the time our classes start. It's very difficult to borrow books from the library if you're an evening student who works during the day. Evening students should have preference in the Restaurant's line for dinner, because the time interval that we have between the end of work and the start of the class is very short. (E34)*

*[...] the library closes at 6:30 p.m. and this is the start time of our class! For those who work during the day away from the university, borrowing a book that is used in our course is very hard! (E47)*

The working students also mention difficulties concerning "having enough time to study, attend mandatory internships, and participate in extracurricular activities" (E11, E15, E16, E23, E31, E46, E47) during the working week, and even difficulties related to "curricular activities of observation proposed by teachers in the morning period" (E23).

*The main difficulties regard balancing work and study in such a way that I can be competent in both, performing my work activities correctly while earning good grades and mastering the contents in the given periods. My time is limited because 8 hours of my day are committed to working and going to the university. The University does not consider including evening students in most activities, as the scheduled times are always impossible for those who work. (E47)*

In addition to the challenge of balancing professional and academic life, the classes' start time poses difficulties for students because "they need to travel from work to the university" (E11, E47). Thus, such students are not always able to arrive on time for the classes.

Another hindering aspect that emerged from the analysis of the students' answers referred to the teachers. In the students' perspective, "[...] some teachers are not flexible and do not understand that most of us work during the day [...]" (E50), "they are not flexible regardless of the student's reality" (E39). Teachers' stereotypes concerning the evening student were perceived. In some situations, the teachers seemed "not to like giving classes in the evening" (E13); sometimes, they did not use the entire "class time" [...] and "demand extra efforts outside class time" (E32). According to the students, the teachers need to be familiarized with the profile of the evening student, comparing it to that of the morning student.

Working students stressed that their limitation concerning the "time available to study brings difficulties to perform tasks outside the classes, outside class time" (E7, E18, E37). They believe they would need to "reserve more time to study" (E37).

The "long duration of the evening course" (E3, E13, E26, E28, E37, E43, E49, E51) - 16 semesters - was another condition identified by students as a barrier and an aspect that demotivates permanence.

When students fail a discipline, the “annual offer of disciplines and the prerequisites required to advance in the curriculum”, which is long, brings, to evening students, “demands, problems, difficulties to continue attending the course” (E18, E25, E34, E35, E37, E38) and a feeling of “demotivation” (E33).

Lack of security around the campus was also reported by evening students, especially at the time when the classes end and they need to return home. It was considered an aspect that hinders permanence.

*[...] if I didn't have my own car, it would be almost impossible to return home safely. (E11)*

*[...] insecurity in the campus surroundings [...]. (E21)*

*Security when the classes end. (E29)*

*[...] Strengthening not only property security, but also the security of the academic community [...]. (E11)*

*Returning home is always a problem because it's dangerous. (E46)*

*I have trouble leaving at night because it's dangerous [...]. (E16)*

#### *Facilitators of students' permanence in the course*

Evening students recognized, in the University, strategies that facilitate their permanence in the course, and gave suggestions that might affect permanence in the course in a positive way.

The “Dental Material Aid”, for students who receive the benefit from the Office of the Provost for Student Matters, was highlighted in the students' report as a great achievement deriving from policies targeted at permanence in the University.

Aiming to prevent fails and dropouts in a long-duration course in which one fail means adding one year to the course, as disciplines are offered annually, students suggested “flexibility to exempt them from complying with prerequisites and permission to attend disciplines in the day period” (E35), even if it is in the condition of ‘audit student’, for those who have availability.

*[...] they could offer this possibility so that, if students have difficulties in a subject, they can be audit students in another class, reviewing the content in order not to fail the discipline. [...] the student who fails many disciplines ends up quitting the course. (E37)*

Furthermore, the students suggested the offer of “extracurricular activities on Saturdays” (E23), the day on which they have more time to perform undergraduate activities. This suggestion emerged as a strategy that might facilitate students' permanence in the course.

Likewise, working students, “with less available time”, should be offered “extended deadlines so that they can prepare themselves for tests and assignments, and teachers should be tolerant towards tardiness caused by travel from work to the University” (E47). As a possibility to optimize the available time to study, the offer of “distance education disciplines/classes/activities” (E15) was recommended.

Finally, students view the conduction of “psychological follow-up since the beginning of the course” (E23) as a facilitator of permanence, so that they can deal with the routine of being a working Dentistry student. Mental suffering and illness were not reported by students.

## **DISCUSSION**

Public health policies<sup>18,19</sup> and public education policies<sup>1,4,20</sup> have stimulated changes in the education of health professionals in Brazil and in the profile of first-year and final-year students.

At UFRGS, this movement included the formation of a health workforce integrated into the Brazilian National Health System (SUS), capable of facing the complexity of the country's prevalent health problems<sup>13,21,22</sup>. The University aligned this with the opportunity of increasing the number of seats in evening courses, prioritizing the access of the working student<sup>8,12,14</sup>. The present study aimed to analyze permanence conditions of students from the evening Dentistry course - barriers and facilitators -, and to characterize the sociodemographic and family profile of these students.

The results showed a profile of students with predominance of women aged 25 to 35 years, white, single and without children, who completed primary and secondary education exclusively in public schools. More than half of the students work, but still live with and depend on the family for support. They reported an individual monthly income of up to 2 minimum salaries. A study carried out with first-year students of the evening Dentistry course at the same University, from 2010 to 2012<sup>8</sup>, identified similar results in the student profile related to predominance of single women without children, who lived with their parents, worked and earned an individual monthly income of 1 to 3 minimum salaries. Although the percentage of working students is similar in both studies (55.7% and 50.9%), in 2010-2012, 10.2% of the students were primarily responsible for their livelihood. In the present study, this percentage was 29.1%, which suggests an increase in the number of students who need to maintain work in their life.

Another characteristic that was different between the studies was students' age group. In 2010-2012<sup>8</sup>, most students were 17 to 22 years old (60.2%). In the present study, 61.8% of the students were aged 25 to 35 years. In addition, the percentage of students who declared themselves white decreased from 85.2% in 2010-2012 to 56.4% in the present study. There was also an increase in the number of students coming from the public education system: from 39.7% (primary school) and 46.5% (secondary school) in 2010-2012<sup>8</sup> to 72.7% in the present study.

The growth observed in the number of students coming from the public education system, as well as the decrease in the percentage of students who declared themselves white, may be justified by the increase in the reserve of seats, set forth by Federal Law 12.711/12, which started to be implemented in UFRGS in 2012<sup>23</sup>. In 2013, the University offered only 30% of its seats to quota students. In 2014, it raised this percentage to 40% and, since 2016, it has been offering 50% of the total number of seats to quota students<sup>24</sup>.

It is important to mention that half of the researched students were the first members of the family nucleus to be admitted into a higher education course, a percentage that is higher than the 22.7% figure found in the study carried out with evening students in 2010-2012<sup>8</sup>. This result suggests a tendency towards amplification of access to higher education, still considered 'elitist' in Brazil, and an educational mobility with a tendency towards social mobility<sup>12</sup>.

Comparing the results of the present study with those of the 2011 study, carried out in UFRGS with students from the day course in Dentistry<sup>25</sup>, it is possible to notice similarities, like the predominance of single women without children. As for differences, in the day course there was a higher number of students coming from the private education system and who do not work<sup>25</sup>. This finding suggests a profile of students coming from the country's most privileged classes, who can dedicate themselves exclusively to their studies and do not need to worry about their livelihood or their family's while they attend the undergraduate course.

The predominance of women in the evening Dentistry course observed in this study corroborates the phenomenon of feminization in the area of health, described in the literature. In Brazil, data from the 2000 census has already shown that most health students in higher education are women, even in historically male courses like Medicine and Dentistry<sup>26</sup>.

In relation to permanence in the evening course, the students perceived that it is affected by students' and their families' financial issues, organizational aspects of the University, the condition of being a working student and having to balance 'academic-family-professional' life, the relationship with teachers, the annual offer of disciplines and its prerequisites, the limited offer of extracurricular activities in the evening period, lack of security in the university campus, travel from work to university, and course duration. This result corroborates findings from a previous study on dropout and retention, carried out with students from the evening Dentistry course of UFRGS in the period from 2010 to 2014<sup>10</sup>.

Barriers associated with students' and their families' financial conditions confirm that the process of democratization of higher education has promoted the access of students with unfavorable socioeconomic conditions to this level of education. In this context, programs targeted at permanence are fundamental<sup>27</sup>, as students who receive financial support have better conditions of social and academic integration and, therefore, a greater chance of completing the course successfully<sup>28</sup>.



As the evening course proposes, in a special way, to include working students in the undergraduate Dentistry course, the necessary services for their education must be present in the evening period. Aspects related to access to and structure of the library, laboratories, classrooms and equipment, as well as spaces for social meetings, like the cafeteria and the student union, can motivate or demotivate the student to attend the teaching institution<sup>29, 30</sup>.

Lack of security around the university campus at night, another issue mentioned by students as something that hinders permanence, emerges as a consequence of the historicity that encompasses Brazil, where the consolidation of democracy has been affected by the increase in violence and insecurity<sup>31</sup>.

Universities are environments of knowledge exchange and production, spaces where all individuals should feel safe. However, they reflect society and, due to this, they are subject to the occurrence of thefts, mugging, homicides and rape<sup>32</sup>, which can affect the learning environment.

Measures that can enhance the students' and academic community's feeling of security - including patients and family members who access the oral health services in the campus and society as a whole - must be discussed by the University. Universities must undergo transformations that reflect a country project characterized by a broad political and social contract, which includes security<sup>33</sup>.

Students highlighted that teachers need to be familiarized with the evening students' profile. When the teacher mediates and facilitates learning, organizes time, activities and the space, and promotes experience and knowledge exchanges, they learn with the student's reality; and the student, as someone who is taught lessons, also teaches and learns<sup>34</sup>. When the teacher values the knowledge of students, especially of those who are inserted in workspaces, they favor the establishment of a positive teacher-student relationship, arouse interest in learning, and favor the performance of activities and participation in classes<sup>35</sup>.

The group of working students faces the challenge of balancing academic life with family and professional life. Simultaneously with lack of time for studies and extracurricular activities, students constantly mention lack of time for issues related to their personal development, be them physical issues (sufficient sleep, rest, proper nutrition) or psychological issues (consequences of lack of interaction with the family)<sup>37</sup>.

This 'lack of time', present in reports of the students investigated here, expresses the particularities of education in evening courses, in view of students' difficulties in having free periods to dedicate themselves to the teaching activities and to complementary activities beyond those experienced during classes<sup>14,30</sup>. Limited opportunities for complementary learning deserve to be highlighted, as this can suggest a weak articulation between the teaching, research, and extension pillars, which define the role played by Brazilian public institutions in society<sup>30</sup>.

This student is not someone who completes academic education and then enters the workspace to perform their professional activity. Many times, the working student works to be able to study<sup>37</sup>. Work, in different situations, must be maintained in this student's life, as it may represent the very condition for this worker's survival and their possibility of studying<sup>38</sup>.

Annual censuses conducted from 2002 to 2009 by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP) have shown that the number of enrolments in evening undergraduate courses had an increasing demand, which may be a reflection of the socioeconomic condition of Brazilian youths. As these youths need to work to be able to study, they perform a remunerated professional activity (not necessarily associated with their area of interest) during the years of the undergraduate course, in order to obtain financial resources to guarantee their permanence in the course, or even to contribute to the family income<sup>29</sup>. More recent censuses (2010 to 2019) have confirmed the increasing number of enrolments in evening periods<sup>39</sup>.

The long duration of the course, 16 semesters (eight years), proved to be a factor that demotivates permanence and causes students' dropout, which had already been identified as a barrier by evening students between 2010 and 2014<sup>14</sup>.

Aware of this situation, the Undergraduate Commission of the Dentistry course authorized a curriculum flexibility that allowed students to attend internships in SUS during the day (upon a previous analysis of seats in practice settings). This initiative reduced course duration and represented an advance for these students' permanence in the course.

Among the strategies that facilitated permanence in the course, students mentioned the financial aid to purchase materials to be used in mandatory practical activities<sup>40</sup>. Created in 2018, it now aggregates a set of benefits offered to students who are socioeconomically vulnerable, beneficiaries of the Office of the Provost for Student Matters. Such benefits aim to provide conditions for permanence and completion of the undergraduate course - free meals at the University Restaurant, Dental Material Aid for the purchase of general materials for study, Day-Care Center Aid, Student Housing, and Healthcare Aid<sup>41</sup>. The Dentistry course meets a demand related to the financial difficulty faced by these students to acquire materials, in view of their high cost<sup>40</sup>.

Finally, students mentioned the issue of mental health and its relation to permanence conditions, and indicated psychological follow-up during the undergraduate course as a facilitator of the development and completion of the course. From the moment they enter higher education, students face situations that can affect their mental health. Researchers have predicted that approximately 15 to 25% of university students will have some mental disorder during their education<sup>42</sup>. The university must be attentive to this issue, offering programs that promote students' mental health, and preparing them to the professional reality and its challenges<sup>43</sup>.

Despite the favorable context of increased offer of evening courses and expanded access to higher education, health education in Brazil takes place predominantly in day courses in the federal network, and the number of graduates does not match, proportionally speaking, the volume of incoming and enrolled students<sup>44</sup>. In addition, it is important to mention that Brazil has undergone budget cuts in public universities and has received little incentive to maintain and strengthen public policies, which can compromise the achieved advances because it affects directly the development of research, student assistance policies, and investments in access and permanence in universities<sup>45</sup>.

This study presents limitations related to the number of participants (approximately 30% of the total number of evening students) and its results must be complemented by future research. Sensitive issues related to students' life and family, as well as situations of suffering and even of mental illness, must be approached in qualitative studies.

The increase in the number of evening seats expresses an achievement that derives from public policies and has enabled, in this University, the working student's access to the undergraduate Dentistry course. Beyond access, the consolidation of the evening Dentistry course requires that the effects of these policies be monitored, which includes investigating how the University has been adapting to this student's profile and demands, and understanding the permanence conditions that they face in their academic trajectory. Giving voice to students contributes to the construction of alternatives to improve their education, which must be analyzed jointly by the entire academic community.

Future research that can complement this analysis - including the perception of students, teachers and managers throughout the trajectory of undergraduate education, and of evening course graduates - is recommended to confirm evening Dentistry courses as one of the education settings of the working student in the Brazilian public university.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the profile of students from the evening course was constituted by a majority of women aged 25 to 35 years, white, single, without children, resident in the city where they attend the undergraduate course, and who attended primary and secondary education in public schools. More than half of these students work, but live with and depend on family support for their livelihood. They report an individual monthly income of up to 2 minimum salaries. The students perceived that permanence in the evening course is affected by barriers associated with financial issues, organizational aspects of the University/course, the condition of being working students, teachers' familiarization with the evening students' profile, security of the campus surroundings, and course duration. The financial aid to purchase dental materials was recognized as a strategy that facilitates permanence in the course.

As strategies to strengthen permanence in the evening course, students recommend flexibility of prerequisites and arrival times in classes, attending disciplines in the day period, disciplines and activities offered in the distance education modality, a greater offer of extracurricular activities on days/times that take the working student into account, and psychological follow-up. They strengthen the importance of mental health care during the course.

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