

# Strategies To Combat Academic Evasion In Higher Education: An Analysis Of Public Policies In Mercosur Countries

Thiago Henrique Almino Francisco<sup>1</sup>, Bruna Feiden<sup>2</sup>, Giancarlo Moser<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Postgraduate Program In N Socioeconomic Development (Ppgds)/ Unesc, Brazil)

<sup>2</sup>(Postgraduate Program In University Management/ Ufsc, Brazil)

<sup>3</sup>(Postgraduate Program In Management/ Unisul, Brazil)

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## Abstract:

The phenomenon of academic evasion in higher education, especially in the context of MERCOSUR, represents a significant challenge, negatively impacting the socio-economic development of the member countries. Given the scarcity of published material on the intersection between academic evasion, public policies and higher education in MERCOSUR, this study is an important contribution to the existing literature. To this end, it aims to investigate and analyze the strategies adopted by MERCOSUR countries to combat academic evasion, with a particular focus on the public policies implemented. This is a bibliographical, documentary and exploratory study, which reviews the existing literature and analyzes official documents from the member countries, providing a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the approaches adopted. It can be concluded that, although there are significant efforts to combat academic evasion, there is a need for more integrated and collaborative strategies between MERCOSUR countries. Recommendations include promoting greater transnational cooperation, developing more effective public policies adapted to local realities, and encouraging additional research in the area to improve

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## I. Introduction

In recent years, academic attrition has become an increasing concern in Higher Education. This phenomenon not only undermines investment in education but also affects the socioeconomic development of member countries. Specifically, in MERCOSUR, which is essential for technological and economic advancement, unique challenges are faced in retaining students until the completion of their courses.

The concept of attrition is defined as the definitive departure of the academic from their course or institution (Ambiel, 2015). This outcome can be due to numerous reasons, whether in private or public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the motivation for dropping out may be related to factors intrinsic or extrinsic to the service offered by the HEI. It occurs that, in addition to harming the results obtained in educational systems, specifically in private HEIs, it directly implies a loss of revenue.

Silva and Santos (2017) describe the policies to encourage access to higher education, offered by the Federal Government, as a possibility to reduce attrition. However, they report possible reasons for dropping out of Higher Education, among them, the low utilization of high school education, which does not guarantee the necessary and fundamental competencies for the egress and permanence in Higher Education, dissatisfaction with the services offered by the HEI, and also the premature choice of profession.

This article aims to analyze the strategies adopted by the active countries in MERCOSUR, namely Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, to combat academic attrition. We will discuss the importance of higher education as a driver for development, addressing how academic attrition can limit this potential. Moreover, we will explore the impact of this attrition not only in financial terms but also in the wastage of human capital and the missed opportunities for social progress. Our objective is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the implemented public policies, evaluating their features, similarities, and divergences. This introduction sets the context for a detailed discussion on MERCOSUR initiatives to combat academic attrition, shedding light on paths to a more promising future in higher education.

## II. Theoretical Review

When delving into the roots of higher education globally, it becomes imperative to revisit ancient civilizations that laid the foundations for the first centers of advanced learning. These early academic spaces played a pivotal role in the preservation and dissemination of knowledge and cultures, traversing a long historical

path marked by evolutions, reconstructions, and challenges, culminating in the model embraced by contemporary society (Gimenez & Bonacelli, 2013).

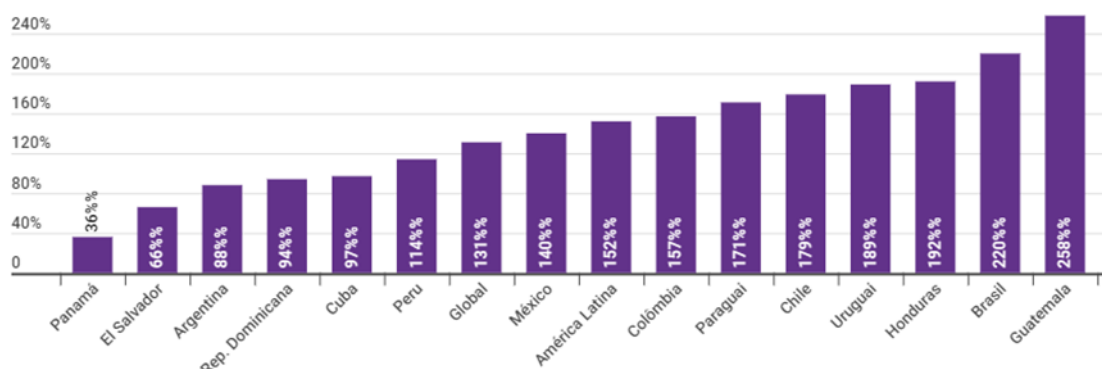
In the early days, in Ancient Greece, philosophy and the pursuit of knowledge facilitated the emergence of notable educational institutions, such as Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum (Barnes, 2000). During the Middle Ages, pioneering institutions like the University of Bologna in Italy and the University of Paris in France were instrumental in developing a more structured system of higher education (Rennie, 2001), with a strong influence from the Catholic religion (Crippa, 1980).

In the 12th and 13th centuries, distinctive features of organized education emerged, with contemporary universities being direct descendants of the medieval institutions of Paris and Bologna. In 1140, the monk Gratian of Saint Felix penned a decree segregating theological teaching from other fields of higher knowledge. Around 1317, a collective boycott occurred where students paid teachers directly, creating a dependency that limited faculty mobility. By the end of the Middle Ages, about 80 universities were established across Europe, perpetuating features such as the association of masters and students, a structured curriculum, and an internal organization that persists to this day (Haskins, 2015).

The legitimacy of the modern university was cemented on the acquired idea of academic autonomy, distancing itself from religion and the state. As a distinct and autonomous social entity, the university only becomes viable in a republican and democratic context. Education, previously seen as a right, began to be regarded as a public service, paving the way for privatization. Thus, the university institution is guided by society as its normative and evaluative reference point, depending less on its internal structure and more on its ability to adapt to environmental changes (Chauí, 2003).

In the 20th century, the university acquired a multidimensional function, evolving according to societal needs. The Manifesto of Córdoba in Argentina highlighted the need to modify the university to transform society. This period was also marked by a university effervescence between 1930 and 1970. Additionally, it is essential to address the impact of neoliberalism, characterized by the deregulation of labor rights and the weakening of the public sector in favor of the private, significantly affecting the educational context.

Over the centuries, universities have followed distinct educational policies, each reflecting the local culture in which they are embedded. The German university values the creation of didactic-scientific communities; the American focuses on societal progress; the French, aligned with the Napoleonic model, emphasizes the sociopolitical function; and the Soviet, influenced by Marxism-Leninism, concentrates on professional training to build a communist society (Ésther, 2016; De Castro, 2018). The evolution of higher education in Latin America between 2000 and 2019 reflects a paradigmatic shift towards educational inclusion and the diversification of access. Countries like Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay have played distinct roles in this transformation. Brazil and Argentina, in particular, have led the growth with significant rates, while Uruguay and Paraguay also register notable advances, aligning with the regional trend of higher education expansion and the pursuit to universalize access to this stage of academic training



**Chart 1: Enrollment Growth in Latin American HEIs, 2000-2019.**

Source: SITEAL (n.d.) adapted from IUS (2021).

Observing the enrollment growth in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Latin America, it is noted that Brazil and Guatemala stand out with remarkable increases, surpassing the 200% barrier. Argentina, following a trajectory of consistent expansion, and Uruguay, with a significant growth rate, demonstrate the universalization of access to higher education in their territories. In contrast, Paraguay, although with more modest growth, is aligned with the regional average, contributing to the landscape of heterogeneity and inequality that characterizes access to higher education in the region. The consolidation of these educational systems points to distinct

challenges and opportunities, reflecting the complexity of each national context in terms of educational policies and inclusion strategies.

### **Attrition In Higher Education**

Public policies are recognized as an interdisciplinary field, influenced by disciplines such as sociology, political science, and economics, focusing on the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of policies. Various definitions highlight the multifaceted role of public policies, from government actions that directly affect citizens' lives to managing conflicts of interest. Essentially, public policies are seen as holistic processes, involving multiple actors and decision-making levels, with long-term impacts on society (Souza, 2006).

Attrition is the definitive abandonment of a student from a course or institution, which, in the case of private HEIs, results in a loss of revenue. However, whether public or private, attrition means idleness for teachers, administrative staff, and also students (Ambiel, 2015). According to Coimbra, Silva, and Costa (2021), attrition also corresponds to situations of disconnection, abandonment, temporary or official withdrawal, rustication, cancellation due to various denials, and cancellation due to income denial. Furthermore, there is enrollment cancellation by court order, internal or external transfer, and the death of the student.

Silva Filho et al. (2007) describe that private HEIs invest 2% to 6% of their capital in marketing actions to attract new students. However, despite the constant struggle to stand out from other institutions and collect a higher number of students each semester, few institutions adhere to attrition combat programs. Moreover, the authors affirm that in the first year of an undergraduate course, attrition rates can be twice as high as in other years. Thus, the first impression will be decisive in keeping or losing the student, as well as conducting assessments semesterly, monitoring results, planning improvement actions, and putting them into practice, respecting the opinion of the clients who use the educational service.

According to positive factors, which strengthen the desire to remain and complete the undergraduate course, they may be related to successful institutional experiences and being enrolled in the chosen degree program. Thus, it can be stated that good interaction with peers, with teachers, and collaborators of the HEI, that is, interpersonal relationships, are decisive for the decision to stay or leave (Barroso et al., 2022; Fior et al., 2022). According to Fior et al. (2022), academic success is a complex concept, with numerous variables, that goes beyond academic performance results, the teaching-learning process, and the well-being of the student. It also involves issues related to real preparation for the job market and employability indicators. Data related to attrition can be measured from mapping the permanence, persistence, completion, and graduation of students (Silva; Sampaio, 2022). According to Barroso et al. (2022), HEIs should adopt signaling measures, where they can perceive the possible students who will opt for attrition.

And, it becomes essential to identify the reasons that lead students to abandon the course, to think of retention and loyalty strategies for students (Silva; Sampaio, 2022). Furthermore, obtaining this data serves as a tool for continuous improvement of teaching-learning processes significantly (Teixeira; Quito, 2021). Thus, adopting the culture of applying a methodology for monitoring the evolution of attrition by undergraduate course (Garcia, Lara, and Antunes, 2021).

With this, some indicators are key points for obtaining these indicators: I. Geolocation and Mobility: distance between the HEI and the student's residence, as well as the study of urban mobility; II. Interest in the professional area linked to the undergraduate course being attended; III. Satisfaction with the services offered: in this aspect, the common and specific physical infrastructure of the course, the faculty, tutors, and administrative staff, the support policies for students, and other relevant factors related to the teaching and learning method used by the HEI should be researched; IV. Employability: a) conducting a study with graduates of undergraduate courses, researching the time between completing the course and the first job in the professional area related to the completed degree; b) the extension and employability policies offered by the HEI; V. Socioeconomic factors: a) family gross income; b) weekly working hours of the student; VI. Psychosocial factors (Ambiel, Cortez, and Salvador, 2021; Barroso et al., 2022; Coimbra, Silva, and Costa, 2021; Fior et al., 2022; Garcia, Lara, and Antunes, 2021; Silva and Cabral, 2022).

This phenomenon, according to MEC (1996), is divided into three groups: course attrition, institution attrition, and system attrition. The first is defined as the student's withdrawal for various reasons, whether by abandonment, i.e., when they fail to enroll, by dropout, or transfer. The second, the student disconnects from the institution in which they are enrolled. And, the last, when the individual definitively abandons higher education. Student attrition from Higher Education is a latent concern of the Ministry of Education, cited in excerpts from SINAES and other legislations. Specifically related to Private Higher Education Institutions, it also becomes a concern for the maintainers, as it compromises part of the company's revenue, presenting idleness in physical spaces and professionals (Garcia; Lara; Antunes, 2021).

According to the factors related to the permanence and attrition of Higher Education, there are indicators prior to the individual's link with Higher Education that should be observed, according to Barroso et al. (2022),

and that influence staying in the undergraduate course. These factors are correlated with the family context, personal characteristics, and previous school performance to higher education.

Furthermore, another point observed was the weekly working hours of the students, which suggests a lack of time for dedication to studies. And, still, the physical and mental fatigue to attend the classes of undergraduate courses (Garcia; Lara, Antunes, 2021). In this sense, in addition to socioeconomic aspects, psychosocial and vocational aspects are also associated (Ambiel, Cortez, and Salvador, 2021; Lima et al., 2020). From the enrollment in Higher Education, it is possible to observe that one of the determining points for the permanence or attrition of Higher Education students is the negative experiences found during the academic journey (Silva; Sampaio, 2022). The non-fulfillment of the student's expectation, related to the satisfaction of the contracted and delivered product, increases the intention to terminate the academic link (Barroso et al., 2022).

Similarly, the objectives and commitments before and after the undergraduate course are correlated with the student's perception of self-efficacy. In summary, the greater their perception of their performance, the lower the chance of attrition (Barroso et al., 2022).

### III. Methodological Paths

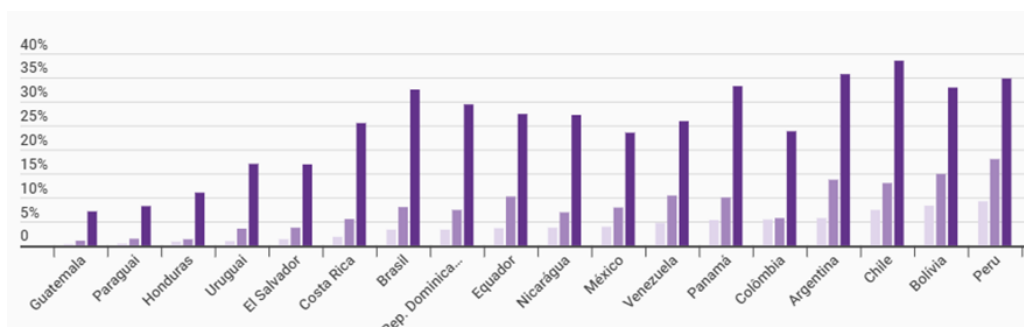
This study adopts a tripartite methodological approach, involving bibliographic analysis, documentary research, and theoretical exploration. The bibliographic analysis focuses on the review of existing literature on academic attrition in higher education, particularly in the MERCOSUR context. Documentary research involves the careful analysis of official documents and relevant publications from MERCOSUR member countries, aiming to understand the public policies and strategies adopted to combat academic attrition. Finally, the exploratory approach allows for a more in-depth investigation of the collected data and information, aiming to identify trends, patterns, and significant insights on the subject.

According to theoretical searches, it was possible to observe a deficiency of published materials on attrition in Private Higher Education, with an abundance of content in public education (Silva; Sampaio, 2022). In SciELO, from 2020 to 2022, using the Portuguese language, 26 scientific articles were found. After selection according to the closeness of the theme, 11 studies were chosen. To enrich the analysis and gain a more detailed understanding of MERCOSUR's policies and strategies, official documents from member countries were used. These documents include legislation, government reports, action plans, and other official publications, which provide a comprehensive and up-to-date view of the approaches adopted in each country to address the challenge of attrition in higher education.

The discussion about academic attrition in higher education, especially in the MERCOSUR context, is of utmost relevance, as it addresses crucial issues related to education and socio-economic development. However, there is a significant gap in the literature on the intersection between academic attrition, public policies, and higher education in MERCOSUR. This study seeks to fill this gap, providing valuable insights and contributing to a deeper understanding of these interconnected themes.

### IV. Data Presentation And Analysis

MERCOSUR currently has five full members: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. However, Venezuela is suspended from all rights and obligations inherent to its status as a MERCOSUR State Party. In addition, there are associated and observer countries in the MERCOSUR bloc, (n.d.). For the purposes of this research, only active countries were used. Attrition in higher education is a concerning issue in the educational systems of countries like Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Dropping out of higher education before completion can be influenced by various factors, including those of a socioeconomic nature. Policies and strategies to mitigate attrition need to consider not only academic aspects but also socioeconomic support for students, so they can remain and thrive in the academic environment.



**Chart 2: Relationship between the percentage of the population that completed higher education and the socioeconomic level, by country, 2018.**

Source: SITEAL (n.d.) (2017).

Upon examining the intersection between socioeconomic level and higher education as illustrated in the graph, it becomes apparent that there are substantial discrepancies between income strata in the attainment of higher education. It is noted that, in the countries mentioned, only a minimal fraction of the population within the poorest 30% completes higher education. In contrast, within the higher income segments, a significantly larger proportion completes this educational stage. This disparity underscores the need for targeted and inclusive approaches to higher education access, in order to promote greater equity in educational attainment. In Brazil and Argentina, for example, over 30% of the higher-income population obtains a higher education diploma, a rate that far exceeds that of the lower-income segments. Uruguay and Paraguay, despite showing more modest rates of higher-level graduation among the wealthiest, still reflect a similar trend of socioeconomic inequality in access to higher education.

The maturation of Brazilian society concerning the importance of professional qualifications has led the State to find alternatives to encourage access and retention of individuals in Higher Education. Thus, public policies play a fundamental role in improving the socioeconomic reality of society and also in reducing exclusion factors (Da Silva; Pessanha; Da Costa, 2018). According to the Ministry of Education of Brazil, there are policies, programs, actions, projects, and activities implemented by the Higher Education Secretariat (SESU). In the following chart (1), it is possible to observe the program and its objective.

<b>Program</b>	<b>Regulation</b>	<b>Objective</b>
Language Without Borders (IsF)	Ordinance No. 30, January 26, 2016	Policy aimed at the internationalization of Higher Education. It seeks to promote affirmative actions to the language policy for the internationalization of Brazilian Higher Education.
Graduation Agreement-Students Program (PEC-G)	Decree No. 7.948, March 12, 2013	Offers higher education opportunities to individuals from developing countries with which Brazil has educational and cultural agreements. It aims to train professionals at the higher level to become agents of social transformation and promote economic development.
Academic Mobility Program for Careers Accredited by the ARCU-SUL System (MARCA)	Decree No. 10.287, March 20, 2020	Aims to encourage mobility and academic exchange among students, faculty-researchers, course and institutional coordinators accredited by the ARCU-SUL system. Its goal is to promote the improvement of the teaching-learning relationship and academic-professional training through new practices and didactic-pedagogical experiences and the dilution of teaching-research-extension boundaries.
Tutorial Education Program (PET)	Law No. 11.180, September 23, 2005	Aims to foster tutorial learning groups by providing scientific initiation scholarships to undergraduate students and tutors of PET groups. In addition, it aims to develop academic activities to excellence quality standards.
Higher Education Accessibility Program (INCLUIR)	Decree No. 5.296, December 2, 2004, and Decree No. 5.626, December 22, 2005	Aims to promote institutional accessibility policies at federal institutions, thus ensuring full access for people with disabilities. This includes architectural adjustments, furniture, technology, and professional training for the development of educational practices.
National Program for Student Assistance (Pnaes)	Decree No. 7.234, July 19, 2010, and MEC Ordinance No. 39, December 13, 2007	The program is designed to democratize access and permanence in higher education for low-income students enrolled in federal institutions, in face-to-face courses.
University for All Program (PROUNI)	Provisional Measure No. 213, September 1, 2004, regulated by Law No. 11.096, January 13, 2005	The program offers full and partial (50%) scholarships for undergraduate courses for Brazilian students not yet graduated, in private Higher Education Institutions.
Scholarship Permanence Program (PBP)	MEC Ordinance No. 389, May 9, 2013	The program provides financial assistance to undergraduate students enrolled in Federal Higher Education Institutions. The main goal is to reduce ethnic-racial inequality.
PROUNI Permanence Scholarship Program (PBP PROUNI)	Normative Ordinance No. 19, September 14, 2011	Offers assistance to full scholarship holders, whose family income does not exceed one and a half minimum wages per person. The student, enrolled in a face-to-face undergraduate course, of at least six semesters, can apply for a monthly aid scholarship of R\$ 400.00.
Student Financing Fund (FIES)	Law No. 10.260, July 12, 2001, amended by Law No. 13.530, December 7, 2017	Offers student financing to students of non-free undergraduate courses with positive evaluation in SINAES. It is directed to students with a gross family income per capita of up to three and a half minimum wages, with a zero-interest rate. For students with a gross family income per capita of up to one and a half minimum wages per person, the financing is guaranteed by the FIES Guarantee Fund, dispensing the traditional guarantor. The P-FIES is guaranteed to students with a family income of up to five minimum wages.
Recognition and Revalidation of Foreign Diplomas	CNE/CES Resolution No. 3, June 22, 2016, and Ordinance No. 22, December 13, 2016	Aims to offer a coordinated system for the revalidation and recognition of foreign diplomas, seeking to streamline and provide transparency in processes.

More Doctors for Brazil Project (PMM)	Interministerial Ordinance No. 1369/MS/MEC, July 8, 2013	With a focus on permanent education in health, it aims to train professionals in the primary health care networks and articulate educational axes of the PMMB.
Support Program for Restructuring and Strengthening of Higher Education Institutions (PROIES)	Law No. 12.688, July 18, 2012	Aims to ensure the operation of HEIs with satisfactory evaluation in SINAES, through the approval of the tax recovery plan. And, for this, the HEI offers full scholarships.
University Extension Support Program (PROEXT)	Decree No. 6.495, June 30, 2008	The main objective of the program is to support public and community institutions in the development of extension programs or projects.
National Program for Student Assistance for Public State Higher Education Institutions (PNAEST)	Normative Ordinance No. 25, December 28, 2010	Expands the conditions for access, permanence, and success of students in state public Higher Education.
Unified Selection System (SISU)	Normative Ordinance No. 2, January 26, 2010	It is an MEC computerized management system, which selects candidates for undergraduate course vacancies offered by Public HEIs. This selection is made based on the results obtained in the ENEM.

**Table 1: Public policies for encouraging enrollment and retention in Higher Education in Brazil.**

Source: Developed by the authors (2023).

These policies, according to Silva and Santos (2017), are responses from elected representatives of society to the country's needs in the educational realm. Since the 20th century, there has been a need to modernize and expand the forms of access to higher education and also to reflect on student retention initiatives as a way to reduce educational attrition. Santos et al. (2022) further describe that the Federal Constitution of 1988 was an important step to minimize Brazil's excluding culture, making education a right for all and a duty of the State, according to Article 205 (Brazil, 1988). In the same passage, it anticipates the full development of the citizen, for the exercise of citizenship and qualification for the job market.

According to the aforementioned authors, besides the programs already described, there are also Affirmative Action Policies as a defining milestone for access and retention in Higher Education, aimed at groups characterized as a social minority. The purpose of these policies is to promote an equitable scenario, minimizing discrimination and balancing the ethnic-racial contrast of society. The use of policies to encourage access and retention of students in undergraduate courses indicates a positive point in reducing academic abandonment. Thus, it is possible to affirm that there is a bond between students and the institution and less time between initial enrollment and the completion of their studies (Silva; Sampaio, 2022). However, it cannot be claimed that access to higher education guarantees its permanence, nor even the completion of the course (Teixeira; Quito, 2021).

In addition to incentive and retention policies, HEIs must turn their attention to institutional policies in the realm of student support. Projects that develop the academic for the job market and career are crucial so that attrition rates in the course do not increase. In addition to this, special attention should be given to the subjects offered in the first semesters of undergraduate courses and the offering of extracurricular activities, through mentoring actions and extension projects, as they will be decisive for the permanence or abandonment of the course (Ambiel, Cortez, and Salvador, 2021; Fior et al., 2022; Marques, 2021). It is necessary for the HEI to think about the student's trajectory and the possible situations inherent to dropping out of the course (Teixeira; Quito, 2021).

According to the Ministry of Education of Argentina, in its Law No. 24.521, it already describes in its article 2 the guarantee of equality of opportunities in access to higher education, as well as its permanence. Furthermore, it aims to promote educational inclusion policies for genders, people with permanent or temporary disabilities (Argentina, 1995). Article 2 is observed to be complemented by the fact that, even though its purpose is not specific to retention and combatting attrition, it can be seen from this perspective. It happens that, undergraduate courses are free, and the collection of fees, taxes, tariffs, or any direct or indirect imposition is prohibited.

Aware of the importance of quality in combating attrition, Law No. 24.195, in its Chapter IX, aims to ensure the qualification of teaching, at any level, consisting of permanent evaluations. Thus, Article 49 provides for the possible alteration of curricular contents when necessary (Argentina, 1993). From the scholarship programs, it is possible to observe an effort to retain students in higher education:

Program	Regulation	Objective
Argentina's Student Support Program (PROG.R.ES.AR)	NATIONAL DECREE 84/2014	Aims to generate new opportunities for social and labor inclusion for young people in situations of vulnerability through integrated actions that enable their training and labor insertion. The Program is aimed at young people between 18 and 24 years of age, residents of the

		Republic of Argentina who want to complete their mandatory studies or start their higher education.
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**Table 3: Public policies for encouraging enrollment and retention in Higher Education in Argentina.**

Source: Developed by the authors (2024).

In 2019, the Argentine university system recorded 2,343,587 students, with 640,401 new enrollments and 152,419 graduates at various levels of education. It was observed that 22.7% of the new enrollees changed courses within one or two years after enrollment. Among the new enrollees in undergraduate and pre-undergraduate courses, 33.5% were between 17 and 19 years old, and 23.2% opted for courses related to science or technology. The retention rate in the first year at state institutions was 62.3%, while at private institutions it was 59.3%. In 2018, of the new enrollees, 61.6% continued their studies in 2019 (Argentina, 2019-2020).

The 2021-2022 yearbook shows that 62.4% of the new enrollees in undergraduate and pre-undergraduate courses in 2020 continued their studies in 2021. The retention rate was slightly higher in private institutions (65.4%) compared to state ones (61.6%). Among genders, 64.6% of women and 59.1% of men remained in their studies. It is also noted that 25.5% of the new enrollees chose courses linked to science and technology, being more prevalent among men (37.9%) than women (18.1%). Furthermore, 30.5% of the new enrollees were under 20 years old (Argentina, 2021-2022).

The Logros program, launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Technology of Argentina, aims primarily to reduce the high rate of dropout in higher education. This program focuses on the development of essential skills for academic success, such as mathematics and academic writing. One of its main positive points is the holistic approach, which includes the use of new teaching technologies and promotes cooperative work. This not only helps students to overcome academic challenges but also prepares them for the demands of the labor market, thereby encouraging the completion of studies and the formation of more qualified professionals (Argentina, 2019).

In Paraguay, Law No. 4,995 specifically addresses Higher Education, with the aim to regulate higher education as an integral part of the country's educational system. Additionally, similar to Brazilian regulations, it defines the types of institutions by their organizational nature, establishes regulations, and tools to measure and ensure quality (Paraguay, 2013). In Paraguay, two scholarship programs are observed to encourage the entry and retention of academics in Higher Education:

Program	Regulation	Objective
Higher Education Scholarships (Becas de Educación Superior)	National Decree 84/2014	Its purpose is to create new opportunities for social and labor inclusion for vulnerable young people through integrated actions that allow for their training and labor insertion. The program is intended for young people between 18 and 24 years old, residents of the Republic of Argentina, who wish to finish their compulsory studies or start their higher education.
Don Carlos Antonio López Scholarships for Postgraduate Studies Abroad	Law No. 4.758/12	It establishes the national fund for public investment and development (FONACIDE) and the fund for excellence in education and research.
Resolution No. 19		It prioritizes and approves the national program for postgraduate scholarships abroad aimed at strengthening research, innovation, and education.

**Table 4: Public policies to encourage entry and retention in Higher Education in Paraguay.**

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

Continuous improvement is ensured through Law No. 5.749/2017, in which the National Institute for Educational Assessment of Paraguay (INEE) uses tools to obtain data and evidence to promote feedback for making important decisions, at all levels of education (Paraguay, 2017). In Uruguay, the higher education system is regulated by various laws, the most significant of which are Law No. 18.437/2008, and Law No. 19.889/2020. These laws establish the structure and functioning of the formal education system, which includes different levels, from initial education to university undergraduate and graduate education (Uruguay, 2008; 2019; 2020). It is also possible to observe scholarship programs for encouraging entry and retention in Higher Education in Uruguay:

Scholarship Type	Law / Entity	Description
University Solidarity Fund Scholarships	Law N. 16.524 National Administration of Public Education (ANEP) (For teaching) (Postgraduate studies)	Fund of Solidarity composed of the Ministry of Education and Culture, University of the Republic, National Administration of Public Education, Retirement and Pension Fund for University Professionals, Notarial Pension Fund, Bank of the Eastern Republic of Uruguay, Uruguayan University Association, and the Technological University.
Teacher Training Scholarships of the Education Training Council (CFE)		
Julio Castro Scholarships		
Carlos Quijano Scholarships		
University Welfare Scholarships		

**Table 5: Public policies for encouraging enrollment and retention in Higher Education in Uruguay.**

Source: Developed by the authors (2024).

Moreover, Uruguay has recently undergone transformations in the quality assurance system for higher education. With the creation of the National Institute for Accreditation and Assessment of Higher Education (INAEET) and the implementation of Law 19.852 on January 8, 2020, Uruguay has reformulated the quality assurance system that was previously carried out by the Ministry of Education and Culture through an ad hoc commission. According to UNESCO (n.d.), in the context of National Education Systems, higher education is recognized as the fourth level, encompassing a variety of educational programs ranging from short-cycle tertiary education (ISCED 5) to the most advanced levels of doctorate (ISCED 8). According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), developed by UNESCO, this higher level is structured in different degrees, which include higher education degree (ISCED 6), master's and specialization (ISCED 7), in addition to the aforementioned doctorate.

The importance of this educational level is evidenced not only by its scope but also by the specific regulatory framework that defines it. This framework is complemented by evaluation and accreditation systems, which ensure the quality and effectiveness of the education offered. Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight the various interventions carried out by countries at the higher level, which are directed at promoting and sustaining the quality and accessibility of this important educational stage. Considering the active MERCOSUR countries (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay) used as the basis for the present research, it is possible to observe their normative structure:

Country	Normative Structure	Regulatory Body
Brazil	National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (1996). Law 9.131/95 that creates the National Council of Education. Law 10.260 (2001).	National Council of Education Secretariat of Regulation and Supervision of Higher Education (SERES)
Argentina	Higher Education Law 24.521 (1995), amended by Law 27.204/15.	Ministry of Education, University Policy Secretariat (SPU)
Paraguay	Higher Education Law 4.995 (2013).	General Directorate of Universities and Higher Institutes
Uruguay	General Education Law 18.437 (2008) Decree 104-014 on university and non-university teaching.	Ministry of Education and Culture - Higher Education Area (AES)

**Table 6: Regulations governing the national higher education systems in the region and responsible bodies.**

Source: adapted from SITEAL (2019).

In Paraguay, in 2018, Resolution 536/2018 issued at the request of the National Council of Higher Education established a significant milestone in higher education with the creation of the National System of Academic Credits. This innovative system stipulates that each academic credit represents a learning effort, encompassing both supervised and independent study hours necessary for the assimilation of the programmatic contents of undergraduate courses. Specifically, one credit is defined as equivalent to a minimum of 15 study hours, distributed between supervised activities and independent ones, with a ratio of 80% for face-to-face work and 20% for supervised autonomous activities. This approach offers educational flexibility that reflects the contemporary needs of higher education, without establishing a rigid standard of credits per academic year.

On the other hand, in Argentina, since 2016, there has been a significant change with the implementation of the National System of Academic Recognition in Higher Education (SNRA), as established by Resolution 1.870 (E/2016) of the Ministry of Education. This system, based on the unit of measure called Recognition of Formative Trajectory (RTF), facilitates the international mobility of students and the recognition of their educational trajectories. Following international practices, the SNRA adopts the premise that an academic year corresponds to 60 RTF units, where each unit represents 27 to 30 total hours of student dedication, totaling



between 1,620 and 1,800 annual work hours. This system is being gradually implemented in Argentine universities, varying in its level of development.

Additionally, in the sub-regional context, the signing of the "Agreement on the Recognition of Graduate Education Degrees of Higher Education in MERCOSUR" (MERCOSUR/CMC/DEC 07/18) in 2018 stands out. This agreement, the result of an extensive negotiation process initiated in 2010 and driven by the MERCOSUR educational sector (SEM), represents an important advance in regional integration. The agreement aims to facilitate professional practice in MERCOSUR member countries, adopting a simplified document verification procedure for the recognition of university diplomas. This recognition, based on the validation of ARCU-SUL, is applied gradually and under the criterion of reciprocity. The ratification of this agreement is underway in the MERCOSUR member states, with significant progress already observed in Uruguay and in process in the parliaments of Brazil and Paraguay.

## **V. Conclude Remarks**

In line with what is stated in the abstract, the investigation of official documents from Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, active members of Mercosur, reveals parallels between public policies aimed at encouraging retention and combating attrition in higher education. There is a convergence in efforts to address this critical issue; however, disparities become evident in access and the transparency of information made available by governments on their respective official websites. As discussed by Coimbra, Silva, and Costa (2021) and established by SINAES, the need for an in-depth understanding of the student composition, as well as their interaction with faculty and the institution, is fundamental. This detailed analysis is essential for the design of effective measures against academic attrition. However, the investigation revealed a significant gap in SINAES regarding the robustness of data related to attrition, highlighting the critical need for continuous monitoring of student satisfaction and the quality of teaching. Institutional assessments emerge as vital tools for collecting data that will inform strategies aimed at minimizing attrition and promoting student loyalty to the academic environment.

The importance of this issue transcends institutional boundaries, reflecting on the overall quality of human capital available in society. The scarcity of published studies on attrition in higher education in the Mercosur context points to a research area that requires urgent attention. This article seeks to contribute to this field, fostering critical dialogue and encouraging the development of evidence-informed practices that can effectively influence educational policies in Mercosur countries. Therefore, the present analysis not only highlights the relevance of the topic but also calls on the academic community to expand the scope of research related to student retention and its socioeconomic implications.

Theoretical contributions within the scope of higher education retention and attrition are invaluable for shaping the framework and principles that guide policy and practice. Theories such as Tinto's Student Integration Model and Bean's Student Attrition Model offer a comprehensive view of the educational journey, suggesting that both academic and social integration are crucial to student persistence. These theoretical underpinnings propose that student engagement, both in and out of the classroom, is a significant predictor of retention. Consequently, this underscores the need for holistic development programs that integrate curricular, co-curricular, and community engagement activities to foster a sense of belonging and commitment to educational goals.

In terms of practical implications, institutions can implement early alert systems and mentoring programs aimed at supporting students from diverse backgrounds, including those who are first-generation college students or from lower socioeconomic statuses. Developing targeted support services such as academic advising, tutoring, and psychological counseling can address specific needs that may hinder a student's academic progression. Furthermore, engaging alumni as mentors can provide current students with relatable role models, fostering an environment where students can envision successful outcomes for themselves. Institutions might also consider flexible learning pathways, such as part-time or online course options, to accommodate non-traditional students who balance academic pursuits with work or family responsibilities.

For future research, longitudinal studies that track students from enrollment through graduation and into their early career stages could provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of retention strategies. There's also a need for cross-institutional research that compares retention rates between different types of institutions (e.g., community colleges vs. four-year universities). Investigating the impact of financial aid policies on student retention, especially in the face of economic downturns, could yield recommendations for policy adjustments. Finally, as higher education becomes increasingly global, research into the retention of international students, including the cultural challenges they face and the best practices to support their integration, will become increasingly relevant for institutions seeking to maintain diverse and inclusive campuses.

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