# Student Permanence in Distance Higher Education Courses: Connections between Brazil and Portugal

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**Abstract**: The issue of student retention in distance higher education courses is a global concern, regardless of country, language, or economy. However, it is not always possible to identify a relationship between countries focused on promoting principles of quality education. Therefore, this article aims to highlight managers' views of two universities, one located in Brazil and the other in Portugal, on the issue of student retention in distance higher education courses. The study presents an analysis of the practices adopted in higher education institutions, providing an opportunity to identify possible factors that contribute to student attrition. The study analyzes the good practices adopted in higher education institutions, providing an opportunity to identify ways that contribute to mitigating student dropout in an intercultural scenario. Based on the feedback received, it is possible to identify convergences between the two groups of managers, for example when it comes to suggesting strategies for implementation. However, there are also divergences regarding other factors, such as the strategies currently used. To enrich the perspective, other important elements for reflection in the search for better university retention rates are also presented.

**Keywords**: Permanence; Higher Education; Internationalization.

## A Permanência Estudantil em Cursos Superiores a Distância: Conexões entre Brasil e Portugal

**Resumo**: A temática da permanência estudantil em cursos superiores a distância é uma preocupação global, independente do país, língua ou economia.  No entanto, nem sempre é possível identificar uma relação entre países com foco em promover princípios de uma educação de qualidade. Assim, este artigo tem por objetivo evidenciar a visão de gestores de duas universidades, uma delas instalada no Brasil e a outra em Portugal, sobre a temática da permanência estudantil em cursos superiores a distância. O estudo apresenta uma análise adotadas nas instituições de ensino superior, oportunizando a indicação deseja possível que contribuem evasão estudantil. O estudo apresenta uma análise de boas práticas adotadas nas IES, oportunizando a elucidação de caminhos que contribuem para mitigar a evasão estudantil em um cenário intercultural. A partir dos retornos obtidos, é possível notar convergência entre os dois grupos de gestores, a exemplo de quando se trata de sugestões de estratégias para implementação. No entanto, também há divergências com relação a outros fatores, a exemplo das estratégias utilizadas atualmente.  Para enriquecer a perspectiva, são apresentados ainda outros elementos importantes de reflexão na busca de melhores índices de permanência nas universidades.

**Palavras-chave**: Permanência; Ensino Superior; Internacionalização

## Permanencia de los Estudiantes en Cursos Superiores a Distancia: Conexiones entre Brasil y Portugal

**Resumen**: La cuestión de la permanencia de los estudiantes en cursos superiores a distancia preocupa a la comunidad internacional, independientemente del país, la lengua o la economía.  Sin embargo, no siempre es posible identificar una relación entre los países que promueven los principios de la educación de calidad. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de este artículo es destacar las opiniones de los gestores de dos universidades, una con sede en Brasil y otra en Portugal, sobre esta cuestión. El estudio presenta un análisis de las prácticas adoptadas por las instituciones de enseñanza superior y sugiere posibles factores que contribuyen a la evasión estudiantil. El estudio presenta un análisis de las buenas prácticas adoptadas en las IES, lo que ofrece la oportunidad de dilucidar formas de mitigar la deserción estudiantil en un escenario intercultural. A partir de la información obtenida, se observan convergencias entre los dos grupos de gestores, por ejemplo, en lo que se refiere a las sugerencias de estrategias de aplicación. Sin embargo, también existen divergencias en otros factores, como las estrategias actualmente en uso.  Para enriquecer la perspectiva, se presentan otros elementos importantes para la reflexión con el fin de mejorar las tasas de retención en las universidades.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

We are experiencing a fast-paced expansion of the online learning market, driven by the development of information and communication technology, changes in people's lifestyles and the global Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020, which has resulted in an acceleration in the growth of the number of online students (Li *et al*., 2021), among other factors.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that advances in globalization, both in economic and communication terms, combined with technological advances in the formation of a networked society, allow the emergence of new paradigms, models, methodologies, and educational processes (García-Peñalvo, 2021). Although different countries are at different stages in relation to higher education, there is a trend towards expansion, diversification of supply, and increasingly heterogeneous students, among other things (Barros, 2023).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has triggered or even anticipated some significant digital transformations. Even educators already incorporating virtual teaching through virtual learning environments did not foresee such a rapid and drastic change imposed by this event (Moreira; Henriques; Barros, 2020), introducing methodologies related to distance education at the most diverse levels of education.

Distance education plays a fundamental role in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as it allows population groups that are naturally excluded from higher education, such as adults, workers, or those who live far from large population centers, to have the opportunity to access a degree (Goulão, 2015).

However, to achieve some of the Sustainable Development Goals (Ipea, 2022), the actions of higher education institutions (HEIs) cannot be limited to offering more higher education, whether online or in person, but must also show attention and care to student retention and, consequently, to the completion of higher education courses.

In terms of retention in undergraduate courses, the 2022 Higher Education Census presents worrying data for Brazil. In presential courses, the dropout rate is 58%, while in distance education it is 59% (INEP, 2023). Although these are general results, they warn of a low retention rate in both modalities.

The available data on student retention and success show the urgency of rethinking the profile of today's students and the current educational and management processes used in HEIs (Da Silva *et al*., 2023).

The retention of students in higher education is a topic that has been very present in discussions in the university environment, especially in recent years. However, it is little known precisely because it exposes a weakness. However, there is great concern about this phenomenon, which is, unfortunately, part of the university routine.

However, high dropout rates in higher education are not something that only affects Brazil; it is a global phenomenon that has a significant impact on everyone's life (Dos Santos *et al*., 2024). In other countries, retention in higher education is on average 10% lower in distance education courses than in presential courses (Bawa, 2016; Muljana; Luo, 2019; Brown *et al*., 2015; Sorensen; Donovan, 2017; Stone; Springer, 2019).

Currently, higher education institutions are facing a highly competitive environment, and it is necessary to ensure that the available resources are used effectively and efficiently to improve students' learning experience and promote factors that encourage student retention and improved performance (Helal *et al*., 2018).

This study demonstrates its importance by investigating the topic of student retention in distance higher education, to analyze and contribute scientifically by presenting the perceptions of managers of two important universities: the State University of Santa Catarina - UDESC, in Brazil, and the Open University of Portugal - UAb, in Portugal. Both work in the field of distance education.

In order to achieve the objective of the study, interviews and an online questionnaire were conducted with twenty-two managers of the two universities, holding different positions and directly involved in distance education courses.

The identification of good practices, difficulties or even suggestions from these two universities to strengthen the permanence of distance higher education courses constitutes the central objective of this article, offering subsidies that can help HEIs to mitigate dropout.

The article is divided into five chapters. In addition to the one referred to as Introduction, Chapter 2 presents the methodology used to produce this article, Chapter 3 points out the results and discussions regarding the results obtained, and Chapter 4 deals with the final reflections on the research and the bibliographical references used during the research.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The tools chosen for data collection by the research participants were semi-structured in-depth interviews (Creswell; Poth, 2018) with the managers of UDESC and UAb, as well as online questionnaires, which were used in situations where it was not possible to conduct an interview.

At UDESC, it was possible to carry out interviews with almost all the mapped managers who have some kind of influence on the issue of student retention. This process covered practically the entire hierarchy of the university, starting with the course management, through the management of the center, up to the rector's office. A total of fifteen managers were interviewed.

At UAb, only one of the thirteen planned interviews was possible, in addition to six online questionnaires. This limitation was probably due to the period in which the research was conducted, which made it impossible for more managers to participate. Nevertheless, the research included managers from all hierarchical levels directly involved in student retention, from course coordinators to the dean's office.

The interviews were conducted virtually to facilitate the participation of a larger number of respondents and followed a pre-defined script that was adjusted as the interviews progressed. Before each interview, each interviewee was contacted in advance to schedule and check possible available dates.

The online questionnaires were made available through electronic forms, following the same script as the interviews. They contained discursive questions that allowed for open-ended responses. The access link was sent to the managers' e-mail addresses in advance, with a one-month deadline for responding.

After data collection, the interviews were transcribed into spreadsheet format, following the same structure as the online questionnaire, and the data were imported directly into the same format.

Next, content analysis was conducted, which consisted of three stages: pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and processing of the findings, inference, and interpretation (Bardin, 2010). According to Bardin (2010), the approach should not be overly tied to the text or the technique in such a way that it could harm the creativity or even the intuition of the researcher. However, it is

important to avoid subjectivity so that the researcher's ideas or even values do not take precedence over scientific objectivity.

Thus, the data from the interviews and questionnaires were linked in the search for the theoretical construct to better analyze the respondents' statements and thus evaluate the viability of the proposals. All the analysis work was carried out without the support of specific qualitative data analysis software.

For each discursive question answered in the virtual questionnaires or interviews, the responses were read, organized, and grouped for later inference. To preserve the meaning of the response while identifying similar ideas, the responses were rewritten according to the meaning and, when possible, used standardized sentences to identify a concept/idea of the group. When relevant, the responses were categorized into institutional (management), personal, and academic (course, teacher, tutor, and Virtual Learning Environment) factors.

As a final step, the responses were grouped according to meaning, to identify the most common ideas for each question, and to obtain grants that could indicate directions for research.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants' responses were organized by frequency based on thematic content analysis according to Bardin (2010). It is important to note that the number of responses may be greater than the number of respondents, as in many cases participants provided more than one factor to answer the same question.

The data were organized quantitatively and arranged in tables; however, in this article the presentation is done through graphs, highlighting the most significant data for the analysis of the questions studied.

Graph 1 shows the results of the managers' responses to the question: "*In your opinion, what are the factors that encourage students to stay in the program? What prevents students from dropping out?*".

**Graph 1 –** Factors that encourage permanence
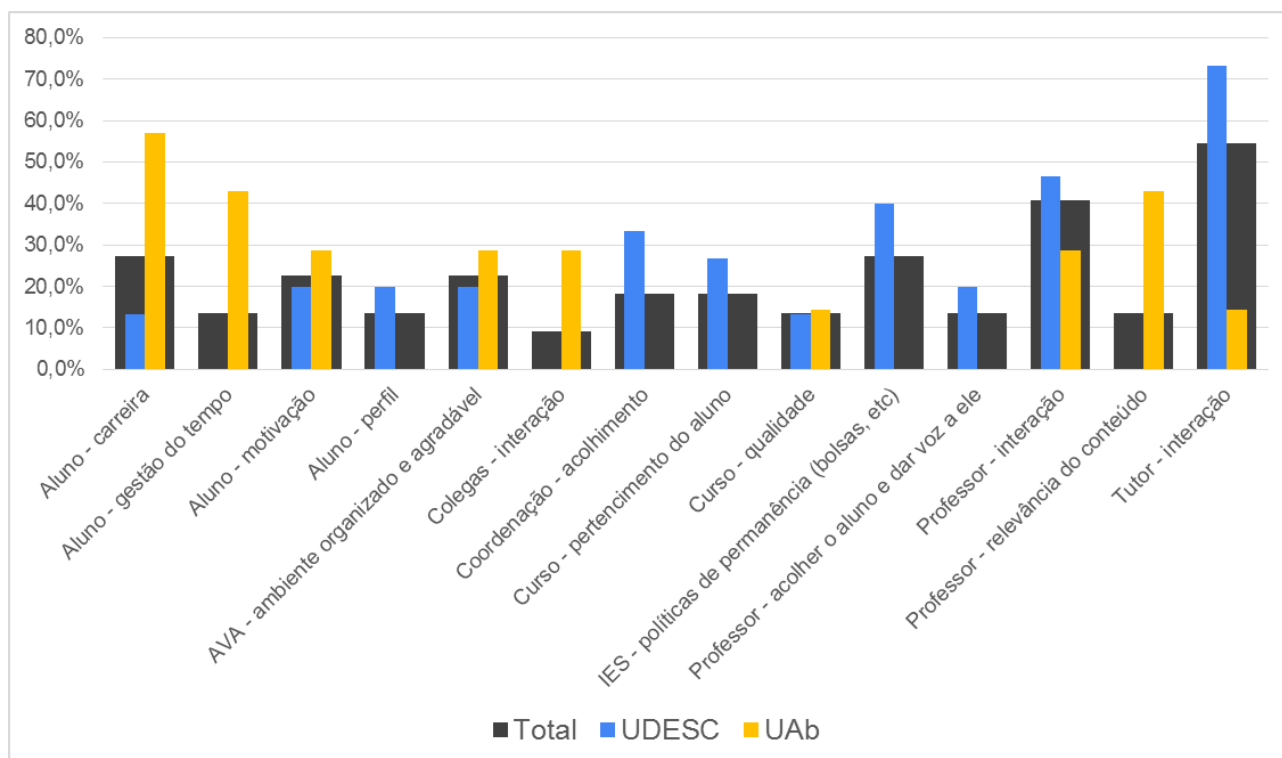
**Source:** Prepared by the authors.

The results show that the most important factors differ between the managers of the two institutions. For the managers of UAb, the three factors that most influence retention are: the importance attributed by the student to the career, time management, and the relevance of the content presented by the professors. For the managers of UDESC, the most influential factors are: the interaction of the tutor with the students, the interaction of the professor with the students, and the support policies for retention established by the university.

When the information from the two groups of managers is analyzed together, considering only the factors mentioned by both groups, the following factors stand out: interaction with tutors, interaction with teachers, the importance given by students to their careers, student motivation, and the organization of the VLE.

The data also reveal differences in the opinions of the managers of the two institutions. While the UAb managers highlighted the student's time management, the interaction with colleagues, and the relevance of the content as important factors for retention, the UDESC managers highlighted the

student's profile, the welcome by the course coordinators, the feeling of belonging, and the policies supporting retention.

Graph 2 shows the results of the responses to the question: "*In your opinion, what are the factors that make it difficult for students to stay in the course? What causes students to drop out?*".

**Graph 2 –** Factors that hinder permanence
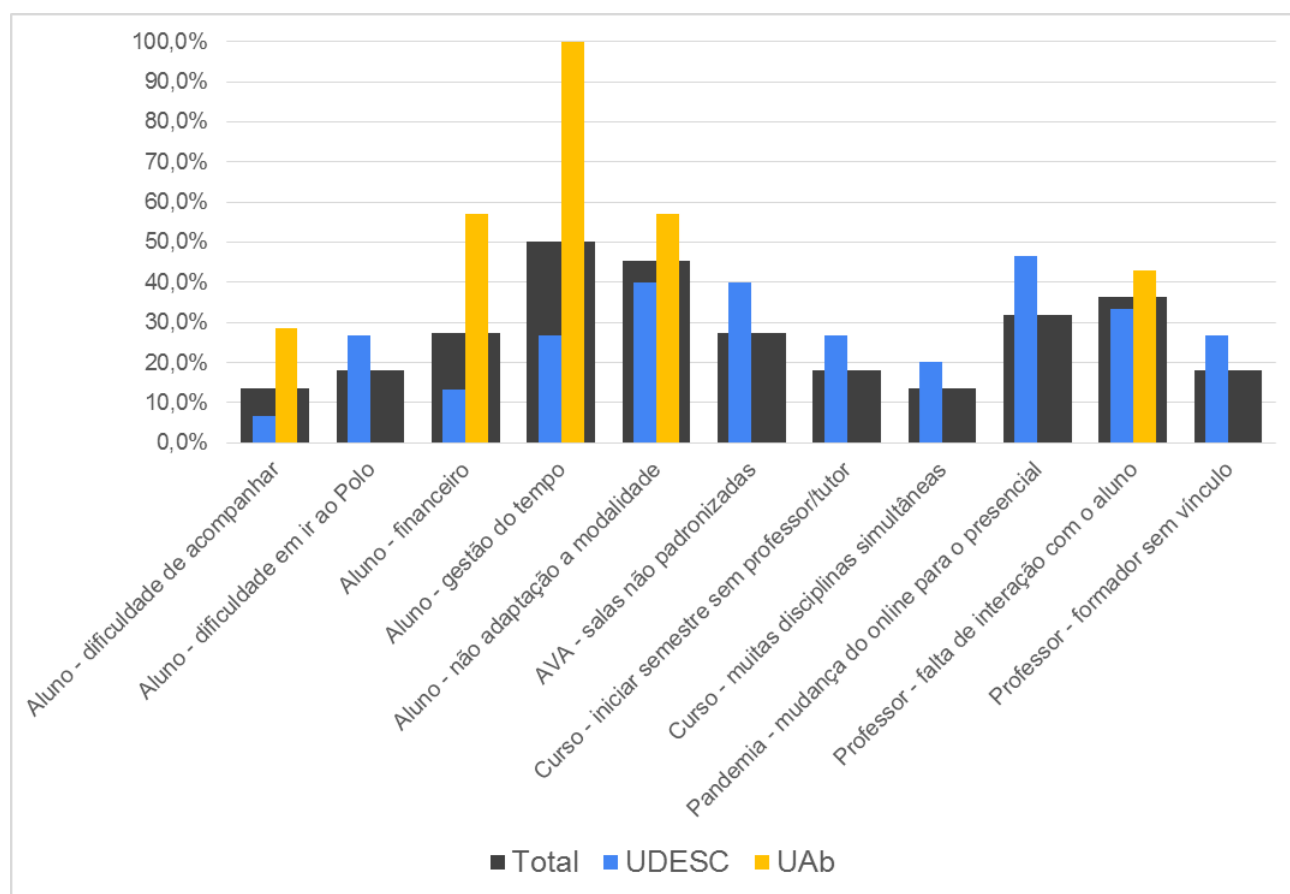


**Source:** Prepared by the authors.

The data in Graph 2 indicate that the main difficulty for UAb managers is students' time management, as indicated by all participants. Other significant factors include students' financial problems and their failure to adapt to distance education. The responses of the UAb managers suggest that the most relevant obstacles are related to the students themselves. On the other hand, UDESC managers identified the following as the main difficulties: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which affected students during the isolation period and continues to be felt even in distance learning courses; the failure of students to adapt to distance education due to expectations that do not match

reality; the lack of organization of the VLE; and the lack of interaction or support from the teacher towards the students.

In the correlation of the answers given by the two groups of managers, it can be seen that the two main factors that hinder retention are: the student's time management and the student's lack of adaptation to the distance education modality. Subsequently, other factors highlighted include the lack of interaction between teacher and student and the financial difficulties of the students.

Regarding the factors that hinder retention, all the factors mentioned by the UAb managers were also mentioned by the UDESC managers, although in different proportions. However, the UDESC managers also mentioned specific factors such as: difficulty for students to travel to the center, non-standardized VLE rooms, starting the course without a teacher/tutor, number of simultaneous disciplines, pandemic, and lack of effective connections of some teachers to the institution.

Another issue addressed concerns the strategies developed by managers to prevent students from dropping out of the course. Graph 3 shows the responses to the question: "*Within your responsibilities, what strategies do you develop to ensure that students remain in the courses?*".

The first analysis that can be made concerning the information presented in Graph 3 is that the strategies used in the universities follow different lines and appear in different quantities..

**Graph 3 –** Strategies developed with a view to permanence
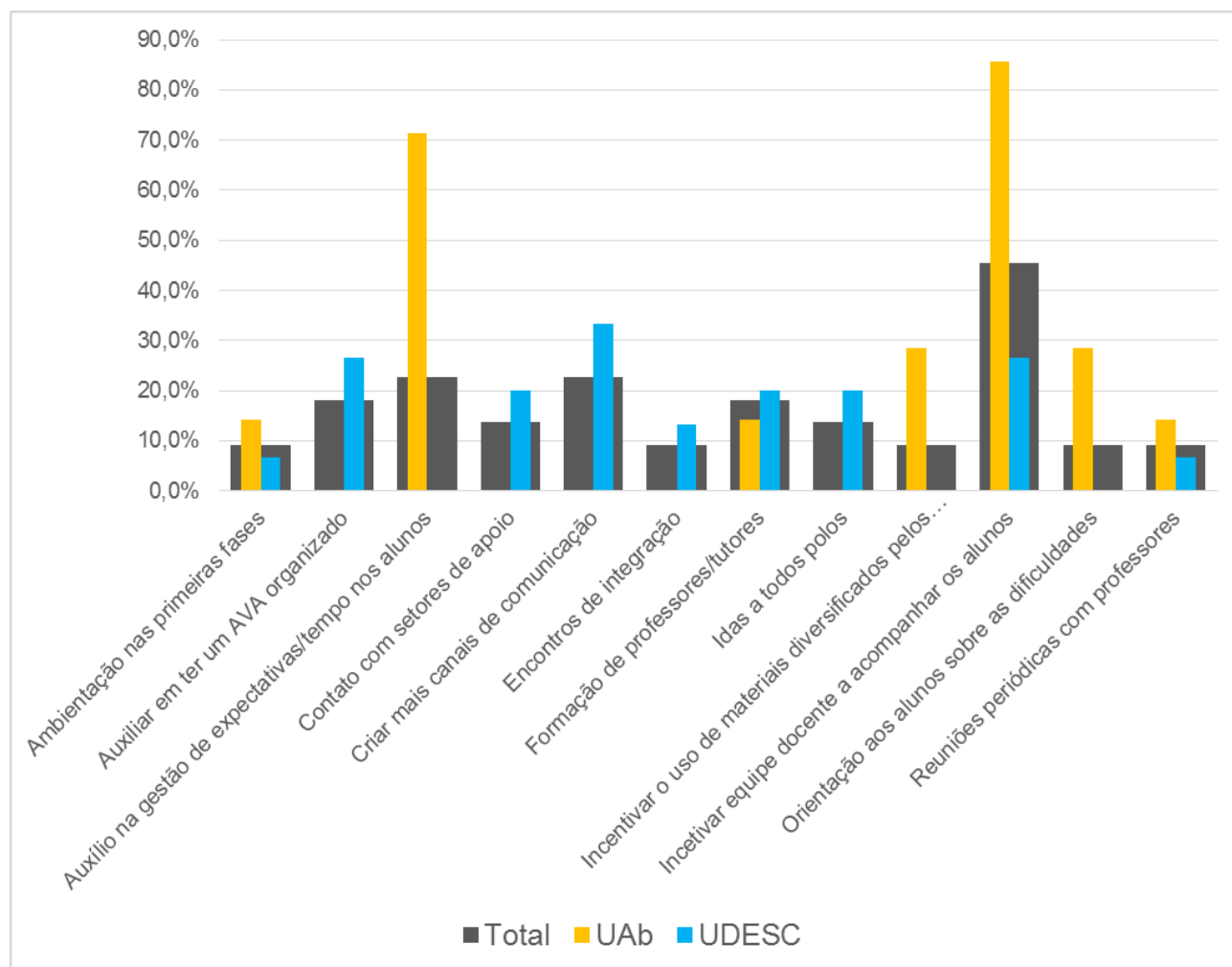
**Source:** Prepared by the authors.

For UAb managers, two factors stand out: encouraging faculty to monitor students and providing assistance/guidance to help students better manage their time and expectations. Other strategies identified include: encouraging professors to use diverse materials and providing guidance to students regarding the difficulties inherent in the modality. At UDESC, no strategy stands out from the others. The six main ones have similar frequencies, with the most frequently mentioned being: creating communication channels with the academic community, encouraging teachers to motivate students, monitoring and organizing the VLE, training teachers/tutors, contacts with sectors related to retention, and constant personal activities in the centers.

From a more global perspective of analyzing the strategies adopted by the two institutions, it can be observed that, except for encouraging teachers to monitor students (45.5% of the responses), the most cited strategies are only mentioned by one of the two universities. Thus, in relation to

UDESC, the strategy is the creation of communication channels, while that of UAb focuses on time management and student expectations.

Another question was asked about the strategies that the managers would like to develop to mitigate dropout. Graph 4 shows the responses to the question: "*What strategies would you like to develop to ensure that students remain in the course and prevent them from dropping out?".*

**Graph 4 –** Strategies that I would like to develop with a view to permanence
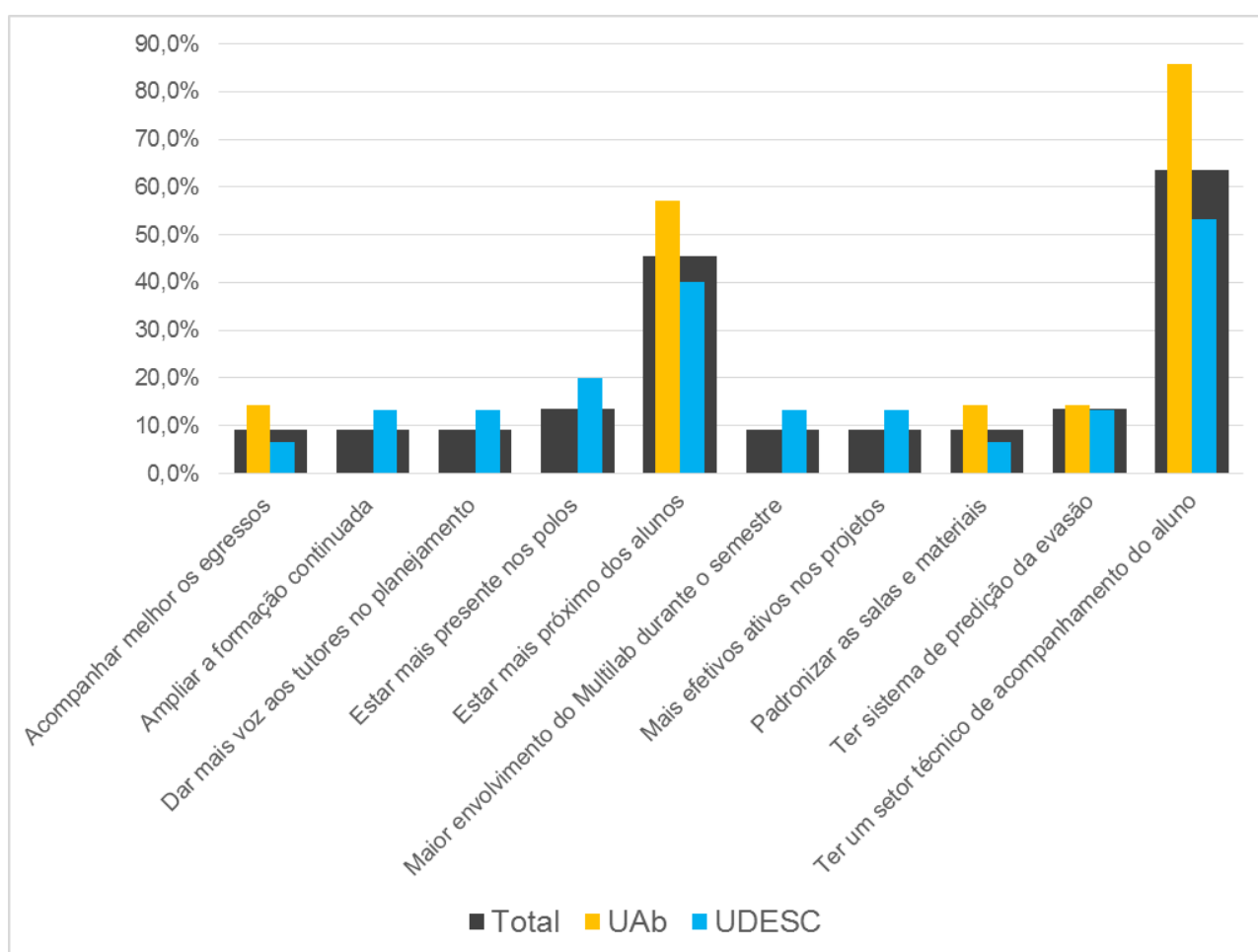


**Source:** Prepared by the authors.

Among the strategies they would like to adopt, two stand out at both universities: proximity to students and the creation of a technical sector to monitor students.

For almost all UAb managers, the creation of a technical department to monitor students is essential. Other strategies include: closer monitoring of graduates, standardization of Virtual Learning

Environment rooms and provision of quality materials, and implementation of a dropout prediction system.

For UDESC, the two most highlighted strategies were: the creation of a technical department to monitor students, mentioned by almost half of the managers; even greater proximity to students, and presence in presential support centers.

When analyzing the responses from both universities, two strategies stand out: creating a technical department to monitor students (two-thirds of the participants) and being closer to students (almost half of the participants). Other strategies mentioned are: a greater presence in presential support centers (mentioned only by UDESC) and the implementation of a dropout prediction system.

It is concluded that although the strategies currently implemented by the institutions differ, both recognize the importance of structured and integrated solutions to improve student retention. It is also observed that the UDESC managers listed a much larger number of proposed strategies for implementation compared to the number indicated by the UAb managers.


## 4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The processes of economic and communication globalization, technological developments, and the construction of a networked society are driving the emergence of new paradigms, models, methodologies, and educational processes (García-Peñalvo, 2021), in addition to bringing together countries that were previously very distant physically.

To achieve the goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to quality education, we cannot limit our actions to simply providing more higher education, whether online or in person. It is also necessary to pay close attention to student retention and, consequently, to the completion of higher education courses.

In this scenario, it is important to note that higher education institutions are immersed in a highly competitive context. Therefore, they need to ensure that their resources are used effectively and efficiently, mainly by improving students' learning experiences and developing factors that promote their retention in courses (Helal *et al*., 2018). Thus, there is a need to share experiences and especially good practices.

This study investigated the issue of student retention in distance higher education through the perceptions of managers of two important universities, one in Brazil and the other in Portugal. For this purpose, interviews and an online questionnaire were conducted with twenty-two managers from both universities, in different positions and directly involved in distance education.

The results indicate a different perspective between the two groups of managers, especially concerning the most recalled factors. The differences are understandable given the different realities of the two countries and their respective educational systems.

In terms of factors directly related to retention, both groups of managers highlighted the importance of interaction between professors, tutors, and students, as well as the importance that students attach to their future careers when considering the job market. However, some factors were mentioned by only one of the groups of managers. The UAb managers emphasized the students' time management and the relevance of the content, while the UDESC managers emphasized the retention policy and the welcoming attitude of the coordinators.

From the point of view of the situations that can make it difficult for students to remain in distance education courses, the managers of both universities identified that the most determining factors concern issues directly related to academics. Among these, the time management of the student stands out, due to the need to reconcile the study with an already very busy routine (work, family...); and the lack of adaptation to the distance education modality, generally due to the false perception that distance education is easier, resulting in difficulties in keeping up with the demands that require organization and determination.

Concerning the factors hindering sustainability, it was noted that some factors were only highlighted by UDESC managers (the impact of the pandemic, lack of standardization of virtual classrooms, professors without permanent contracts, and difficulties in traveling to the presential center, among others). These factors indicate specific situations related to the reality of the university.

Regarding the strategies used by managers to promote retention, it was observed that the two universities had different approaches, except for encouraging faculty to monitor students, which was mentioned by 45.5% of the responses. The next three most commonly used strategies were only mentioned by one of the two universities. UAb highlighted the support given to students in managing their time and expectations, as well as the use of different materials by teachers. On the other hand,

UDESC highlighted the creation of more communication channels, the organization of the VLE, and a greater presence in the centers.

Finally, concerning the strategies that university administrators would like to implement, two main ones stand out, as indicated by both groups: the creation of a technical department to monitor students and a closer relationship between the institution and the students. This seems to be an important way to increase retention rates, as it focuses on issues that directly affect dropouts, with the help of a specialized and dedicated team.

This article presents a study of the perceptions of administrators of two major universities regarding student retention in distance education courses. By showing convergences and divergences in different aspects, we have tried to present new reflections on this very relevant and current issue, to improve student retention rates and encourage the sharing of experiences.

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