University Student Retention In Mozambique And Its Challenges: Meanings Of Individual Trajectories

Phd. Telma Amorgioana Fulane Tambe[1], Phd. Candida Soares Da Costa[2,] Mc. Jeniffer Regina Rodrigues De Lima[3]

(Center For Modeling, Engineering And Applied Sociial Sciences/ Federal University Of ABC, Brazil)
(Center For Studies And Research On Racial Relations And Education – Nepre -/ (Faculty Of Education, Federal University Of Mato Grosso, Cuiabá/Brazil)
(Center For Studies And Research On Racial Relations And Education – Nepre -/Faculty Of Education, Federal University Of Mato Grosso, Cuiabá/Brazil)

Abstract:
This study reports on an international experience involving faculty and undergraduate students from Mozambique, along with Brazilian volunteers, under the project "Together We Are Stronger," facilitated by the Center for Studies and Research on Racial Relations and Education (Nepre) at the Federal University of Mato Grosso, Brazil. The focus is on analyzing the challenges faced by Mozambican students in maintaining their university enrollment and the activities developed to support them in this process. The project includes nine students from various courses at Eduardo Mondlane University, the Higher School of Marine and Coastal Sciences in the city of Quelimane, and Save University, as well as one high school student. The results highlight the challenges being overcome through assistance in areas such as transportation, income, housing, and the lack of institutional and faculty support. It concludes that there is a need to strengthen policies and programs for university retention to contribute to a technical, democratic, and quality education that converges towards changing students' life expectations.
Key Word: *University student; Student challenges; University retention; Educational policy.*

I.   Introduction

Higher education (HE) in Mozambique was shaped by a historical process tied to the idea of extending the Portuguese university system and maintaining the unity of Portuguese territory in the 1960s (Langa, 2014; Tambe, 2023). Consequently, it developed with the aim of educating young people from privileged social strata, particularly whites. For example, according to Gasperini (1987), out of 748 students enrolled in 1968, only 8 were Black. According to the author, this 1% was showcased in public demonstrations domestically and abroad as proof of the Portuguese government's integration policy.

In reality, it was a subtle operation aimed at reinforcing racial discrimination policies, clearly privileging the children of European residents in Mozambique, as well as Asians and assimilated individuals. Thus, the HE system was exclusionary, aligned with the objectives behind its creation.

Following Mozambique's independence in June 1975 and the nationalization of education on July 24 of the same year, the situation did not immediately change. HE remained elitist, excluding the popular masses.

Starting in 1976, HE policy had to incorporate other demands, such as access for historically excluded groups: Blacks and people with disabilities, thereby transforming the university landscape through educational policies (Tambe, 2023; Gasperini, 1989; Langa, 2014) and presenting challenges to retention[1].

The democratization of HE in Mozambique is marked by the revision of the Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique (CRM) in 1990, which established education as a citizen's right and a state duty (CRM, 1990, Art. 92). This shift aligned the Mozambican state's approach with market principles, initiating the liberalization of education, particularly HE, and promoting extension and equal access for all citizens.

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[1] In this study, the category of retention is understood as the policies and/or actions undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) aimed at ensuring, addressing, and resolving aspects not only of a socioeconomic nature but also pedagogical and cultural (Cordeiro; Cordeiro & Muller, 2016, p. 134).

The principle of university funding under the neoliberal logic, characterized by the instrumental market rationale of capital, was definitively incorporated with the creation of the first Higher Education Law in Mozambique through Ministerial Diploma Law No. 1/93[2], dated June 24. This law paved the way for the establishment of private higher education institutions (HEIs) by religious, private entities, and individuals (Tambe, 2023; Miguel, Tambe, Costa, 2021; Langa, 2014; Mário *et al.*, 2003; Nobre, 2011), guided by a set of regulations, laws, and public policies.

However, as reported by Langa (2017), Tambe (2023), and the Ministry of Education through its Strategic Plans for Higher Education (SPHE, 2000, 2012), it was only from the year 2000 that the Mozambican government began implementing state measures aimed at expanding access and retention in higher education. These measures included a strong commodification of higher education, with state funding for enrollment in private HEIs and the possibility of repaying the funding after completing the studies. Additionally, public policies were adopted to expand access and retention in higher education through the expansion of public HEIs and social programs, such as scholarship programs and the reserved admissions program for populations in the central and northern regions of the country, implemented in 2012, to ensure quality public education.

The democratization of higher education through educational policies promoted increased access by establishing public HEIs in district headquarters and opening more private HEIs. However, higher education in Mozambique remains elitist, even in public HEIs, as they require tuition payments, especially for evening courses, significantly benefiting students from families residing in the capital. This concentration is notable, with 70% of the total HEIs located in Maputo city (Tambe, Costa, Gonçalves, 2022; Tambe, 2023; SPHE, 2012). This distribution results in a more educated population concentrated in the capital and urban areas, while more than 60% of the Mozambican population lives in rural regions, where the poverty rate is estimated at 37.4% (National Institute of Statistics, 2017; UNFPA, 2017), revealing significant regional imbalances, especially considering that the majority of the rural population is composed of women.

On the other hand, the expansion of access to the public higher education system brought with it the need for conditions to ensure retention in university. Thus, retention emerges as a fundamental element for higher education to stimulate and enhance learning and human development, based on a critical-reflective, contextualized, and inclusive perspective, essential for civic education and overcoming socioeconomic and regional asymmetries, as well as promoting gender and ethnic equity in Mozambique.

In the context of equity policies aimed at gender equality, as highlighted by Guerra (2013), these are linked to neoliberal market ideologies. These inclusion discourses for all (Ball, 2001) encompass women from or living in rural regions of Mozambique, historically relegated to a secondary position.

Rural women seeking access to higher education (HE) in Mozambique face difficulties that make the process of admission and retention quite challenging, given the characteristics of their family, economic, and social contexts and the strong evidence of patriarchal discourses (Guerra, 2013; Tambe, 2023). They bear the burdens of poverty, inequality, and violence. In rural regions of Mozambique, the percentage of women with no completed level of education is still considerably high, and most depend on agricultural activities for survival, which hinders their access to and, more importantly, their retention in HE compared to urban women.

This text aims to report on the participation experience of women from rural regions attending HE in Mozambique, involved in the project titled "Together We Are Stronger" and the actions being developed by the project to support these women's retention in university. This project has taken on an international dimension for student assistance, supported by the Center for Studies and Research on Racial Relations and Education (NEPRE) at the Federal University of Mato Grosso, School of Education, and a group of Brazilian individuals, including a Mozambican faculty member.

The project has been developed virtually since 2022, due to the geographical distance between Mozambique and Brazil, with in-person activities in Mozambique on limited occasions. It involves women enrolled at Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM) (located on the main campus in Maputo city and the Higher School of Marine and Coastal Sciences in Quelimane, the capital of Zambézia province in central Mozambique) and at Save University (UniSave), located in the southern region[3]. More recently, the project included a young man who attended high school in Maputo province in 2023 and entered HE this year.

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[2] This refers to the Higher Education Law, passed in 1993, which created space for the establishment of private HEIs. Over at least 10 years, there were new political and socioeconomic transformations and a new perspective on the function and nature of universities in Mozambique.

[3] According to Article 7 of the 2004 Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique, the country is territorially organized into provinces, districts, administrative posts, localities, and settlements; urban areas are structured into cities and towns. Mozambique is divided into eleven provinces, including the city of Maputo, which has held provincial status since 1980. The eleven provinces of Mozambique, according to the Codifier of the Political-Administrative Division, from north to south, are: in the North: Niassa, Cabo Delgado, and Nampula;

Thus, the objectives of this report are:

(i) To describe the challenges faced by Mozambican female students from rural areas in staying in university, such a financial difficulties, lack of social support, mental health issues, cultural and gender barriers;

(ii) To highlight the activities carried out in the "Together We Are Stronger" project and the specific actions developed to support the students in staying in higher education (HE) and how these activities help the students overcome the challenges they face;

(iii) To demonstrate the impacts and successes of the "Together We Are Stronger" project on the retention of students in HE.

In this context, the reported experience demonstrates the relevance of implementing institutional policies, specifically student assistance in Mozambican HEIs, to ensure retention and academic performance, as well as to change the lives of the individuals and their impact on/for society.

1. Institutional Challenges to Implementing Student Assistance in University

When students entering HE experience various demands throughout their university stay, such as lifestyle changes, new learning, the urgent need for new habits, new routines, development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for professional competencies, in addition to financial and interpersonal relationship aspects (Matta, Lebrão, Heleno, 2017), these meanings attributed to students' experiences in their HE trajectories present themselves as challenges that mark their formative processes. These are the consequence of a dynamic and complex process that the word awakens in self-awareness both socially and individually (Vygotsky, 2011). In this context, they may experience tensions, pressures, failures, affections, limitations, conflicts, and successes that will mark their HE trajectories positively, negatively, or ambivalently.

As highlighted by Silva, Barbato, Urnau, Zibetti, and Pedroza (2018), entering HE represents the first moment of transition, providing various opportunities for changes in the individuals' trajectories, who are historical, unique, and belong to specific social groups with specific cultural practices. On the campuses of UEM and UniSave, the ruptures and discontinuities that mark the transitions of young people from their home communities to the university generate possibilities for negotiating meanings, promoting reflections among various ethnic groups, and giving rise to new communities in spaces that expand or restrict feelings of belonging. The production of meanings is a dynamic process occurring in the relational and dialogical contexts in which students live and build their identities (Santana, Oliveira, 2016).

Therefore, the university, as an educational space-time, becomes important for the construction of subjectivities and social practices. Thus, this space-time can constitute a means of overcoming historical inequalities and promoting fundamental rights based on the possibility of coexistence of pluralities and diversities, as well as integrating the structural conditions of domination and these social inequalities (Mészáros, 2008).

However, in designing policies for democratizing access and educational trajectories, the Mozambican government understood that

One of the ways to allow for a more rapid generalization of education to the entire population and its qualitative growth is to involve those attending certain levels and subsystems of the National Education System[4] in the partial coverage of the State's expenses for this sector, without prejudice to the free primary education established by Law No. 4/83 of March 23, which created the National Education System (MINED, 1986).

Thus, the right to education ceases to be free for the middle, secondary, and higher levels, becoming a paid service, a commodity. Similarly, in order to access student residences, students should start contributing to the respective expenses. During the same period, various provisions regarding the payment of enrollment fees (registration and tuition fees), payment for admission exams, approved under Article 4 of Decree No. 71/83 of December 29, and Article 4 of Decree No. 70/83 of December 29, by the Ministers of Education and Finance were already in force (MINED, 1985).

In compliance with the current decree, HEIs began charging tuition fees. UEM, for example, established the payment of tuition fees[5], charges, and other contributions through Ministerial Diploma No.

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in the Center: Zambézia, Tete, Manica, and Sofala; in the South: Inhambane, Gaza, Maputo, and the City of Maputo.

[4] According to Law 6/92, the National Education System in Mozambique consists of 5 subsystems and is structured into 4 levels of education: (i) General Education Subsystem; (ii) Adult Education Subsystem; (iii) Technical-Professional Education Subsystem; (iv) Teacher Training Subsystem; and (v) Higher Education Subsystem. The levels are: Primary, Secondary, Middle, and Higher.

[5] Tuition is the amount a student pays for regular attendance of theoretical and practical classes and does not include the payment of enrollment fees or failure fees.

62/89 of July 26, as specified in the regulation that approved the fees, tuition, and boarding in the Mozambican National Education System. Thus, annually, UEM and other public HEIs must submit for approval the amounts for tuition fees, charges, and other contributions when subject to change.

Article 1 of Ministerial Diploma No. 62/89 established the following tuition fees to be paid: a) National students 4,000.00 MT[6]; b) Foreign students US$200.00. The tuition fees for attendance to be paid semiannually were set as follows: a) National students 1,000.00 MT per subject; b) Foreign students US$300.00 per semester, in convertible currency[7], according to the country's exchange fund.

In 1995, reinforcing the idea of paying tuition fees, the National Education Policy advocated that HE represents a national investment in terms of financial, human, and material resources, in addition to the public resources allocated for the institution's operational and investment projects (Tambe, 2023). According to the author, the government again emphasized the students' contribution to their education investment through partial participation, updating tuition fees and contributions in university residences and dining facilities, as well as engaging in paid activities benefiting the educational institution, such o professional training, research, and consultancy contracts. This instrument established the payment of tuition fees at UniSave and other HEIs.

The same author further states that to enable attendance in higher education and address the discriminatory effects arising from regional and economic inequalities or other barriers that hinder access and retention of students, Law 1/93 establishes measures such as: the guarantee of scholarships with quotas predetermined for individuals with lower economic income from each region, which can be awarded to students in both private and public HEIs. However, it does not clarify what constitutes lower economic income, compounded by the issue of parents without remunerable employment who still wish to see their children attend an HEI.

In the Mozambican context, this university, traditionally an elitist institution, despite efforts towards democratization and assuming a social role in building a more just and equal society, is in a state of contention, experiencing tensions from diverse projects, but ultimately still deeply marked by its exclusionary characteristics.

These factors, combined with the difficulties students face in remaining until they complete their courses, leading to dropout, have created what Gonçalves (2018) and Ezcurra (2011) term as exclusionary inclusion. This means an increase in available slots and, therefore, expanded admission opportunities, but without accompanying policies to ensure retention and completion, causing students to enter the doors of higher education but leave before graduating.

In this direction, studies that seek to understand the meanings attributed by students to the challenges faced in their educational trajectories for retention, based on their narratives, are important investigative proposals, as they perceive students as historical subjects who move and interpenetrate.

II.   Methodological Aspects

This work is part of the "Juntas Somos Mais Fortes" project, supported by the Center for Studies and Research on Racial Relations (NEPRE) at the Federal University of Mato Grosso and individual volunteer entities from Brazil and Mozambique. It is driven by the intersecting experiences of black Mozambican women from low-income backgrounds and rural areas in accessing and remaining in higher education. The study analytically narrates their experiences of persistence in higher education, focusing on the structure and objectives of university education.

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[6] The Metical, abbreviated as MT, is the official currency of the Republic of Mozambique, instituted on June 16, 1980, replacing the colonial currency—the Portuguese escudo in its Mozambican version.
According to the exchange rate determined by the Central Bank of Mozambique and, after 1992, by the banking system, 1 USD corresponded to 34.90 MT. Thus, 4,000.00 MT corresponded to approximately 115 USD (Banco de Moçambique, 1994).

[7] The practice of paying tuition in foreign currency in public and private HEIs for services rendered was prohibited by Presidential Decree No. 7/2010 of March 19, although, in most cases, such services continued to be billed in the national currency, the Metical. This decision was made considering that this practice, besides harming the government's economic policy objectives and the preservation of the national currency, illegitimately increased the cost of living for citizens; it also fostered sources of social disharmony and tension, constituting an illegal procedure since the national currency is the Metical, according to the CRM, Article 300, and other legal instruments (Law No. 2/2006 of March 22, Article 106, paragraph 5 on the General Tax Law; Law no. 22/2009 of September 28, Consumer Protection Law) legitimized by the constitution.

The methodological approach was qualitative to facilitate the description of the results, allowing for an understanding of the challenges faced by female students from rural Mozambique in their efforts to remain in university. For data collection, the study centered its analysis on understanding and explaining the dynamics of social relations, placing the research within the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes of these women. Since this is a qualitative study based on Discourse Analysis (Foucault, 2009), the focus was on the subjects' own discourses and the minutes produced during monthly meetings held between 2022 and 2023, discussed contextually and interwoven with the literature.

In the first part of his book "The Archaeology of Knowledge," Foucault (2009) guided this work by proposing the suspension of historically constituted units, questioning their construction, and seeking to recompose other units for analysis. He suggests not selecting a given object/concept a priori, but rather studying the relations that give rise to concepts/objects.

Using Discourse Analysis (DA) as a data analysis tool reflects the need to explore texts and discourses beyond their surface. Adopting DA implies a break from viewing language as static or as a bearer of intrinsic truths. Instead, DA is chosen to uncover underlying meanings that go beyond the written text, revealed through a contextual investigation of the circumstances that shaped it.

Participants

To participate, the requirements included being a black woman, a student from rural areas in Mozambique, enrolled in a public university regardless of the course, voluntarily agreeing to collaborate with the research and later with the "Juntas Somos Mais Fortes" group by signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF), and being over 18 years old. In the doctoral research that led to the study titled "Gender and Education in Mozambique: Access and Persistence of Rural Women in Higher Education," defended in February 2023 and which also initiated this project, 62 students were selected and interviewed.

From this group, nine students were selected to compose the "Juntas Somos Mais Fortes" collective based on the amount of financial contributions from volunteers. These students are enrolled in undergraduate programs, during the day, at the Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM) campuses in Maputo city (located in the southern part of the country) and at the School of Marine and Coastal Sciences in Quelimane (central region), as well as at Save University (UniSave), located in Gaza province, Xai-Xai city, in the early and final years of their courses. The project plans to include new students as the number of contributors increases and, consequently, the amount collected, maintaining a monthly distribution limit for the participants.

The project involves four students from UniSave, enrolled in undergraduate courses in Biology Teaching, Agricultural Production, Food Technology, and Veterinary Medicine. Of the five students from UEM in Quelimane, two are studying Marine Geology, one is in Oceanography, and another in Marine Biology. The student enrolled at UEM in Maputo is studying Education Organization and Management.

These universities represent significant academic spaces that address various demands of the Mozambican population and serve students from across the country. Despite the complexity of Mozambique, with its diverse geodiversity and sociodiversity stemming from its extensive territorial, social, and environmental range, the two public universities provide territorial representation for nationally-oriented studies, without compromising the project's scope. For instance, UEM is the first and largest higher education institution in Mozambique and generally has a significant territorial presence. It is probably the only institution where research in the country is closely aligned with the distinct territorial realities of Mozambique, capable of supporting any genuinely Mozambican project.

Regarding demographic classification, these students were born, live, or come from rural areas, local settlements, or traditional communities distant from the city/district centers where the universities are located. In Mozambique, there is a significant rural/urban divide. The National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2021) reveals that the rural population is 65.14% and the urban population is 34.86%, with rural poverty estimated at 56.1% compared to urban poverty at 37.4% (UNFPA, 2017). When these numbers are further disaggregated, they reveal significant variations across different provinces. Regarding higher education enrollment, in 2015, the gross enrollment rate was 5.4% for women and 7.4% for men (UNESCO, 2018).

Thus, although in qualitative research subjects can be identified by the researcher through declared or written permission for data collection, this study opted for an agreement between the researchers/authors and the students that their identities would not be revealed. It was understood that the search for the desired information should be embedded in a cooperative interaction, where each moment is a dialogical achievement rather than an obligation. Therefore, the names of the participating students were designated by pseudonyms of their choice.

Research Instruments

The researchers/authors, also members and contributors to the "Juntas Somos Mais Fortes" Project, developed a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions, starting with identification data (age, gender, and

current course) followed by events that have affected and/or continue to affect their educational trajectory, the structure of the university they attend, the type of support received to remain in university (financial, emotional, etc.), student assistance program benefits utilized through the project, and finally, self-reports referencing aspects that enable the expression of the impacts of the support received in the project on university persistence and completion of the undergraduate course.

This questionnaire was placed in an electronic form using Google Forms and sent via the WhatsApp application created by the students. Therefore, the form was completed remotely in December 2023, requiring internet access, a smartphone, or a computer, as well as 30 minutes of availability for completion.

For data analysis, the Microsoft Excel 2013 computational resource was chosen, through which the students' responses were extracted from the form, undergoing verification to ensure proper completion.

Once the responses were extracted, they were categorized, and finally, the final analysis was performed, establishing connections between the findings and the adopted theoretical-methodological frameworks. The theoretical framework of Michel Foucault's Discourse Analysis (2008, 2009) was adopted as a reference, following three phases: pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and treatment of results for interpretation and inference.

III.   Results And Discussion
The results encompass qualitative data aimed at understanding some of the challenges faced by Mozambican students from rural regions in remaining in university and the impacts resulting from the student assistance project "Juntas Somos Mais Fortes," based on the meanings attributed to the academic trajectory at the university.

Profile of the Students
The 9 participating students are aged between 20 and 29 years old and, as previously mentioned, are enrolled in different undergraduate courses, namely: Biology Teaching, Agricultural Production, Organization and Management of Education, Marine Geology, Oceanography, Marine Biology, and Veterinary Medicine, covering both morning and afternoon periods. All students come from rural areas in the districts of the provinces of Maputo, Inhambane, Gaza, Nampula, and Cabo Delgado. They had to relocate geographically to attend higher education in the provincial capitals.

All students are Black, with family income below the minimum wage. None of them engage in any paid employment, nor do they receive support for their stay from the university where they are pursuing their undergraduate studies. In their family context, they are the first to attend higher education. Five students are fatherless orphans, therefore coming from families headed by single mothers/widows, two of whom work as domestic workers in households, one as an informal vendor in markets or on the streets, and as a farmer, simultaneously, similar to two more mothers who are solely farmers. Another student's mother suffers from an incurable illness. Regarding the fathers, two work as security guards in private companies, earning up to the minimum wage, and two are farmers.

The agricultural activity carried out by these mothers and fathers is predominantly subsistence or family-based. According to Tambe (2023); Tambe, Costa, and Gonçalves (2022), UNFPA (2017), Maquenzi (2021), and IOF (2014/2015), family farming in Mozambique has been and continues to be the source of income for over 68% of the Mozambican population but has been neglected in the scope of public policies. These authors suggest that in rural areas, poverty is widespread, living above the international poverty line of 1.9 USD/day. In his study, Maquenzi (2021) observes that almost half of the budget is allocated to the purchase of food and non-alcoholic beverages, hindering investments in economic activities and education, and consequently, there is a significant restriction on access to agricultural technologies, which practically boils down to the use of hoes.

In addition to noting the existence of low family income, it is observed that agriculture exhibits low profitability, often supplanted by additional activities such as small-scale trading or wage employment, highlighting that the family income of these students is a high poverty index, which in turn demonstrates the possibility of significant difficulties impacting their educational trajectory.

These conditions have a gender dimension, as poverty disproportionately affects women who, on average, are poorer; have lower levels of education and worse health outcomes than men; and have a higher rate of HIV/AIDS infection (14.2%) compared to men, at 20.2% (UNESCO, 2028).

Despite these challenges, these students do not receive assistance from the university for their stay. If universities were to adopt student assistance policies, it would mitigate inequalities by providing access to the right to public, free, and quality higher education. In this regard, persistent vulnerabilities are evident and should be considered in the development of effective responses and solutions within and beyond the university's walls. On the other hand, based on research conducted by Tambe (2003), Tambe, Costa, and Gonçalves (2022), Gonçalves (2018), and others, it is demonstrated that the profile of students entering Mozambican HEIs exhibits

income inequality, ethnic diversity, cultural diversity, gender diversity, and social diversity linked to vulnerability and the possibility of access and retention, which should be considered paramount in university management processes in the country.

Challenges Faced in the Academic Journey of Young Mozambican Women

The educational experiences of young students in Mozambique are shaped by university experiences, where discourses, knowledge, and practices are formed through dialogical interactions that provide specific conditions for socialization, learning, and development. Therefore, it is essential to understand the possible discontinuities and ruptures that characterize these trajectories, as evidenced in the challenges faced.

Using a research instrument, the written narratives were collected and organized into two main categories: (i) structural challenges and (ii) support received from the "Together We Are Stronger" project for retention in higher education.

In the **structural challenges** category, the students' narratives refer to the challenges they face in attending university, namely logistical, infrastructural, economic aspects, and even illness. Regarding the economic component, low income was the element mentioned by all the students. The lack of personal and family employment proves to be a crucial factor that decisively impacts their participation in higher education and academic performance, as maintaining life and subsistence are directly affected. For these students, attending university entails high costs, requiring the purchase of study materials, transportation, tuition fees each semester, food, and accommodation:

My mother supports my studies by working as a domestic worker. Since the money was not enough, I had to sacrifice some things. For example, I have gone without buying food and used the money to buy school materials, transportation, and pay tuition. Before receiving support from the project, I spoke with acquaintances or friends who helped me with this as well. The salary my mother receives as a domestic worker is not even a minimum wage, and I would need at least 5000 MT[8] for basic expenses. I am not the only child." (MARISA, 2023).

The biggest difficulty is having money. My father earns little money, and I have a brother; there was a moment when I had to interrupt my studies because I couldn't afford the expenses. But he managed to get some odd jobs to support me. He is a war demobilized soldier and can get some money doing odd jobs. He does a bit of everything. Per month, he sends me 3000 MT[9], and from this amount, I take 1500 MT for house rent; what is left I use for transportation, food, and school materials. The lack of money contributed to my failure in some subjects, as I couldn't buy study materials and had difficulties getting a phone and computer." (MACUÁCUA, 2023).

From the beginning, I faced difficulties that are now minimized, but it was necessary to keep going and not give up. I faced financial difficulties, lack of a place to live, school materials, and food, especially since I have health problems that require very strict nutrition. I am from Nampula and study here in Quelimane without a scholarship. But I applied for a scholarship and got no result." (GIGI, 2023).

The above narratives indicate that admission and retention in higher education are largely due to family investment and support, emphasizing the special importance of the mother and father. When referencing financial support, the mother is particularly highlighted, combined with efforts directed towards work, especially informal commerce, with the aim of providing basic comfort and maintaining their daughters' studies. The mother is emphasized as a companion and dedicated individual. She takes care of all the details for her daughters' success in their educational journeys.

In this context, the potential institutional effects on individual trajectories in higher education are not solely influenced by the students' family background (Jencks, 1972). According to Dubet (2015), they are also impacted by the educational institution itself and can be countered by political actions aimed at increasing the equalization of educational opportunities.

It seems important not to lose sight of the fact that, given the history of higher education in Mozambique, its accessibility is a fairly recent phenomenon. Higher education institutions were designed to accommodate and grant degrees to the national elites (Gonçalves, 2018; Langa, 2014; Mário et al., 2003; Miguel, Tambe, Cândida, 2021; Tambe, 2023). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face various difficulties in their academic affiliation, both in terms of material access and symbolic affiliation, which have been mitigated through strategies they themselves undertake, as well as financial support via student assistance policies.

Therefore, the incongruities of the capitalist logic in Mozambican society are also manifested in educational processes, especially in the struggle of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic classes. These students face challenges in entering, staying in, and completing their university studies due to limited resources

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[8] The equivalent of USD 76.9 at the exchange rate on April 15, 2024.
[9] The equivalent of USD 46.1 at the exchange rate on April 15, 2024

(both family and personal) and the need to enter the labor market, which often hinders or even prevents the continuity of their studies. Although student assistance policies can mitigate these challenges by addressing basic needs, the students' narratives highlight the absence or limitations of policies and programs aimed at ensuring the permanence and democratization of higher education, as illustrated by the following accounts:

To the best of my knowledge, the university or the government does not offer any assistance. I have never heard of any aid for such purposes (Mafalda Jalane, 2023).

I received a partial scholarship. This scholarship only covers tuition fees. I don't know if they will provide anything else. This scholarship is important because while our parents pay for rent and other expenses, the school covers our tuition, so we don't miss out on our studies (Ashera, 2023).

I received a scholarship that only includes tuition fees for each semester. Thanks to this, I avoided some problems along the way. It was a help for me, so I wouldn't give up on my studies. It encouraged me to continue (Gertrudes, 2023).

The above accounts demonstrate that democratizing access to universities for historically excluded groups must be linked to ensuring their continued enrollment through public policies of the State. Various studies indicate that there is a close connection between education and the material and economic conditions required to meet academic demands, such as food, transportation, tools, housing, health, and books (Dubet, 2015; Santos, 2014; Tambe, Costa, Gonçalves, 2022, among others). Thus, universities must commit to supporting the diverse student bodies entering their spaces and the new material demands that arise. For instance, in Mozambique, charging poor students from rural areas for university accommodations, requiring payment for meals at the university cafeteria, and scholarships that only cover tuition fees highlight the precariousness, selectiveness, and limitations of student assistance policies, ultimately weakening their democratic and inclusive nature.

In this context, as elucidated by Santos (2014) and Neves (2004), it is suggested that student assistance should be understood as a social policy characterized as a public policy capable of promoting social rights and full citizenship, thereby helping to overcome exclusionary processes. Given that the rural women entering undergraduate programs often do not work, have parents without formal employment, and in many cases, rely on subsistence agriculture, the quantity and value of the scholarships offered are incompatible with their needs.

Considering that the students in this study belong to collective cultures, another obstacle referenced in their accounts is the distance between their nuclear family/community or home province and the place of study, as they had to relocate geographically to attend higher education. The students' accounts highlight the profound financial difficulties (housing, income) and the importance of student assistance in providing the necessary resources for tuition, materials, food, transportation, housing, etc.

The other major difficulty is finding a place to live and being able to study peacefully, as well as taking care of my health, because without health it is impossible to study. I have gastritis problems and cannot eat properly. I can only eat once a day, which doesn't help due to the lack of resources. My parents engage in informal trade and are farmers, which is where the family's sustenance comes from, and I do not work (Gigi, 2023).

I had great difficulty paying rent because I am from Maputo, came to Quelimane to study, and have no family here. I also lack money for registration, food, and school supplies (Letícia, 2023).

To my knowledge, the university does not offer any kind of help. Last year, there was an initiative within the faculty that promised transportation for people living far away, but it never happened. They also talked about a student card for the metro bus, but it involves a lot of bureaucracy, and I never managed to get that card (Imperatriz, 2023).

At the beginning, I thought about stopping my studies to work because I lived very far away. It was very difficult for me to commute between home and school, and I needed money to cover transportation and course expenses. The experience of living far away was very difficult for me. I couldn't arrive on time at the university, missed some classes, and had very low academic performance (Marisa, 2023).

The above accounts highlight that the effectiveness of access and retention policies is evaluated based on their outcomes in ensuring the retention of all students until the completion of their chosen courses, even though there may be strong indications that cultural factors are more relevant in defining access and retention in higher education. However, there is no doubt about the impact of economic conditions and dispositions. At the same time, these narratives corroborate the findings of studies by Santos (2014), Lahire (1997), Tambe, Costa, and Gonçalves (2022), Soares, Monteiro, Maia, and Santos (2019) regarding the responsibilities assumed by students upon entering higher education, such as managing their budget and study time for different subjects and academic tasks. The means of transportation to access the university was also pointed out as a challenge concerning the time spent commuting[10] and its impact on academic performance due to the fatigue it causes.

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[10] In almost all Mozambican cities, regarding mobility and accessibility, the narrow road infrastructure and the lack of accessibility and transportation services condemn the suburban, peri-urban, and especially rural

On the other hand, these findings indicate that university retention depends on effective economic and structural conditions, coupled with the fact that the public higher education system in Mozambique is partially free during the daytime and entirely private during the nighttime. For example, analyzing the UEM Scholarship Regulations regarding the allocation of scholarships, we find a contradiction between the students' accounts and what the regulation defines as a housing scholarship: it is a housing scholarship that "entitles the beneficiary to housing or a supplementary subsidy to cover the costs of housing, without including any other benefit" (UEM, 2015, p. 6).

However, the students' accounts, which only have access to university housing, make it clear that they are required to pay USD 18 (for university housing in Maputo) and USD 12 (for university housing in Quelimane) to access this public good, even though this payment is not stipulated in the UEM scholarship regulations. It is noteworthy that these students resort to university housing because it is more affordable (in terms of costs) compared to the prices charged in the neighborhoods around the university.

According to Tambe (2023), the charges for housing and tuition fees are part of the current National Education Policy of 1995, through which the government emphasizes the co-participation of students in investing in their education by means of their partial participation, the updating of tuition fees, and contributions in university residences and restaurants, and the realization of income-generating activities in favor of the HEIs, such as professional training, research, and consultancy contracts.

It is necessary that, in addition to ensuring that students arrive at the campuses to register for the courses they wish to attend, there are conditions to overcome other challenges inherent to the complexity of the Mozambican reality, particularly in rural areas. This must be understood because, beyond offering access and forms of student aid, it is crucial to recognize that the socioeconomic, racial, geographical, and gender contexts significantly influence the retention and success of the students.

Another key indicator for student retention or dropout in higher education is participation in extracurricular activities, social networks, academic engagement, guidance from the faculty, academic performance, etc. From the theoretical-methodological construct outlined for this study, it is emphasized that the knowledge of these students, as rural women-students, should be heard—especially when empowered by the exercise of discourse and critical and political thinking—as legitimate voices for the development, conceptualization, and implementation of access and retention policies or political actions to combat dropout. These should be collectively constructed, creating new vocabulary for new attempts and models of political practices in their occurrences, as noted by Tambe (2023).

Despite numerous challenges, the students value admission, retention, and their educational journey in the university, highlighting new opportunities, learning experiences, and improvements in their living conditions, their communities of origin, and their families through higher education.

The idea is to finish my degree, get a stable job, and work to improve my life and achieve financial Independence (Marisa).

My plans are to get a job, then start a family, improve my mother's living conditions, and pursue a master's degree (Letícia).

First work and then have my own family (Imperatriz).

Get a job and be able to help my community and other girls (Macuacua).

Work, build a house for my parents, and give them a decent life because they deserve it for everything they are doing for me (Ashera).

From these narratives, it is clear that attending higher education, for these women, is a transitional phase towards autonomy, experimentation, and preparation for a competitive job market and/or for continuing their studies in graduate school, without necessarily relinquishing their families' role as supporters and providers. As Oliveira and Saldanha (2010) stated, the construction of expectations and future ideas requires the establishment of strategies that allow the realization of their goals, thus anticipating future chronological milestones in the present.

Furthermore, according to Tambe (2023), post-graduation employment will provide these women from disadvantaged backgrounds and their families with the minimum material conditions necessary for living. Employment will also be a strategy used by them to remain students, as studying requires resources for school materials, food, transportation, among other aspects.

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populations to social vulnerability (Tambe, 2023; Maloa, 2019). This results in only a small portion of rural youth accessing higher education, highlighting the need for policies to change and improve mobility for users and travel within cities, metropolitan areas, and suburban areas.

Impacts of the "Together We Are Stronger" Project on the Retention of Female Students in Higher Education

Throughout 2022 and 2023, the "Together We Are Stronger" project maintained its commitment to supporting the academic and personal development of nine undergraduate students from three Mozambican higher education institutions (UEM main campus, UEM School of Marine Sciences, and UniSave), where they pursue different courses. By sharing life experiences within the group, among the project members, and with the experiences of Mozambican professors and students, satisfactory results have been recorded today. The group has held various meetings, conducted online due to the participants being from different countries: Mozambique and Brazil.

The activities carried out during this period aimed to provide comprehensive support to the participants, promoting monthly meetings, assisting in overcoming challenges, facilitating internships, and promoting English language learning as a foreign language, among other relevant matters.

Monthly Meetings:

The "Together We Are Stronger" project organizes monthly meetings, providing a safe and welcoming space for participants to share their experiences and challenges faced during their courses. These sessions promoted the exchange of ideas and experiences, strengthening the bond between participants and the project team.

Support for Academic Difficulties:

During the monthly meetings, participants had the opportunity to share their academic difficulties. The project team, consisting of two coordinating professors, volunteer professors, and collaborators, provided personalized guidance to identify strategies to overcome these challenges. Additionally, it encouraged experience sharing among participants, promoting the formation of study groups among students of the same course or related fields. These groups facilitated knowledge exchange and clarification of doubts, encouraging participation in academic events such as scientific conferences and seminars, as well as collaborative research to enhance academic understanding and proficiency.

Furthermore, the team offered guidance in choosing topics and designing projects for the students' monographs. This dynamic approach resulted in the participation of the students in the XVII Conference on Racial Inequalities in Brazilian Education, held annually by NEPRE, an event parallel to the Education Seminar (SemiEdu, organized by the UFMT Graduate Program in Education), in addition to the production of a collective article under the supervision of the project's coordinating professors.

Internship Placement:

Recognizing the importance of practical experience and the need for internships, especially as these young women face additional challenges due to being women, black, and from low-income backgrounds, the project assisted the girls in finding internship opportunities in their respective fields of study. This not only provides practical learning opportunities but also offers valuable experience to complement academic theory with relevant practical skills for the job market. Various authors (Bittencourt, 2005; Coelho, 2006; Gouvêa, 2009) emphasize the relevance of internships for students, as they benefit both the employer and the intern. According to Tambe (2023), this network of contacts can be crucial for future job opportunities and career development, as they will have overcome stereotypes and prejudices.

Additionally, the first professional experience has significance that goes beyond the professional realm. Women facing various disadvantages, whether gender, origin, economic, social, or cultural, by participating in internships, have the opportunity to acquire a wide range of skills and knowledge, not only for their career development but also for their personal growth. As highlighted by Andrade et al. (2020), it is essential to recognize and value interns as qualified professionals, remembering that they are in a training stage, seeking inspiration, guidance, and growth opportunities. In other words, from an early stage, they learn to deal with challenges that cannot be anticipated by theories. This experience can significantly contribute to reducing the inequalities faced by women in Mozambique, particularly those from rural areas.

English Classes:

Understanding the relevance of English in the global job market and access to academic and professional resources, the project implemented regular English classes among the girls, taught by one of the group members through digital platforms due to the diverse geographic locations of the students. For these young students, this investment aimed to increase their competitiveness in the job market and open doors to national, regional, and international opportunities, while also promoting personal empowerment and helping to break down barriers related to gender, social class, and ethnic and racial belonging.

Therefore, the assistance provided by the project has shown a profound impact on the academic, familial, and personal lives of the participants. Many of them, facing situations of vulnerability, have found essential support in the project to continue their studies. The emotional and practical support offered contributes not only to academic success but also to the strengthening of these young women's self-confidence and resilience, as can be seen from their testimonies:

The help I have received from the project has been very helpful because, based on this support, I can pay the rent for the house where I live, add to my monthly groceries, and pay my academic fees, as I study in a province far from home. If it weren't for this help and God's grace, I wouldn't be able to continue my studies at the university because it was difficult to pay the bills. Now, university is going well; no failed courses, despite the second semester being a bit complicated, but everything was resolved, and I passed all the subjects. This year I plan to start writing my research project to begin my thesis and defend it next year (Letícia, 2023).

The help I have received from the project has helped me a lot, o it is based on this support that I pay for transportation to the university, tuition fees, and academic materials. I am an orphan, and my mother is a farmer. She cannot afford to support my studies. Therefore, your support is not only financial; with the project, I learn to be and exist, and this has been reflected in my academic results. I managed to transition to the fourth year. In conclusion, if it weren't for God's help and the project, I wouldn't be able to continue my undergraduate studies (Imperatriz, 2023).

It is based on this support that I can pay the rent for the house where I live. I study in a province far from mine, and I have no family there. Before joining the project, I lived in the university residence, hosted by a colleague in her bed [...]. When I joined the project, I was able to rent a house where I still live. My academic performance improved significantly (Gigi, 2023).

The project's help has been a privilege for me; it has helped with household expenses, such as paying rent, especially because I come from the province; I have no family in Maputo, and I cannot get a scholarship to stay in the university residences. This support makes a huge difference for me because, two years ago, I considered dropping out due to financial issues, but with this help, I felt motivated to continue my studies. Today, I am in the final stretch of my course, thanks to this support that has changed my life (Macuácua, 2023).

Before I started receiving this help, I faced many difficulties because there are many bills to pay. I even thought about quitting my studies due to a lack of resources. It was difficult for me to get money for rent, tuition, and food. But thanks to you, I have managed; with your help, I can pay the rent since the university is in Chongoene, and I have no family there, and the university does not have accommodation for students who struggle to rent a place to live and study. You have been a great blessing in my life; may God bless you (Marisa, 2023).

From these narratives, the enormous importance of identifying the needs of the students involved during the project's development is highlighted. As emphasized by Hyland and Shaw (2016), this involves understanding academic texts, both oral and written, in various contexts, such as reading research articles, writing summaries, emails, and research proposals, as well as presenting papers at conferences. This understanding extends across various fields of knowledge and aims to meet their specific needs as students.

Acquisition of Computers:

Additionally, the project coordination was able to acquire three laptops. This achievement represents a significant milestone, providing the girls with essential resources for completing academic work and facilitating access to information. Therefore, this technological support will further contribute to their educational success.

The lack of money contributed to my failure in some subjects because I couldn't buy study materials, I had difficulties getting a phone, computer. I got a problematic phone that doesn't allow me to do almost anything; the keys get stuck, now that we have online classes, I can't participate properly because it freezes or shuts down, sometimes I can't even take tests (Macuacua, 2023).

One of the problems is the internet, which made me miss classes during the pandemic. Since I am not a scholarship recipient, I couldn't afford an internet package, besides not having a computer, which makes it difficult to do academic tasks and writing (Gigi, 2023).

Another difficulty is the lack of a computer, and my phone has problems. It's difficult to do research and type college papers (Ashera, 2023).

Based on these statements, it is understood that the computer is an essential tool to drive education and technology, providing significant learning opportunities, and playing a crucial role in the social integration of new generations (Ferrés, 1998; Valente, n.d.), therefore, a powerful tool for storing, representing, and transmitting information and knowledge. Therefore, it becomes evident that access to a computer should be a priority in public policies, aiming to ensure maximum access to information and technology. This is essential to empower individuals both intellectually and socially, preparing them to face an increasingly competitive and selective job market.

The computers acquired were allocated to the three campuses attended by the project participants, as all of them face financial difficulties in obtaining and accessing digital resources. It is important to note that a large part of the Mozambican population does not have access to the internet, and those who do usually use 4.5G connection on their mobile devices. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE) from 2017, only 8.1% of men in urban areas and 5.8% in rural areas have access to the internet and computers, compared to 5.3% of women in urban areas and 3.1% in rural areas. Furthermore, men represent 30.8% of the population with a cell phone, while only 22.4% of women have this resource.

In this context, the distribution of computers to students by the "Juntas Somos Mais Fortes" project raises important questions about the formulation of policies that promote access to new Information and Communication Technologies as an integral part of social inclusion in all spheres. This includes economic, political, market, social habits, and even professional development aspects. By ensuring this access, students would be provided with full participation in society and the exercise of their citizenship.

IV.   Conclusion

Designed to cater to the country's elite, a small portion of the population that occupies the highest social positions, over the past two decades, the Mozambican university has been called upon to participate as an agent of social transformation in promoting and addressing socioethnic, regional, and gender inequalities through the democratization of higher education. Indeed, the expansion of enrollment has been occurring, yet in an exclusionary manner, especially through the private sector.

Entry into the university is a significant milestone, as it not only contributes to personal development but also to collective advancement. This is due to the crucial importance of training professionals who are both skilled and aware of the specific demands of their communities, regions, and the country as a whole.

The significance of the students' trajectories highlights the importance of access to scholarships and other aids, such as housing and transportation, while also describing the university as a significant part of their life and personal and social development projects, especially within the Mozambican rural context. While university access policies are essential, they alone are not sufficient to mitigate the historical inequalities that persist during the educational process, resulting from the non-intersection of gender, class, ethnicity, regional, and economic inequalities in the country.

In this context, the "Juntas Somos Mais Fortes" Project, throughout the years 2022, 2023, and 2024, has been playing a vital role in promoting higher education and the personal development of its participants. The diversity of challenges faced by these young women demands a comprehensive approach, and the project is fully committed to providing continuous support to empower them to overcome obstacles and achieve their life, educational, and professional goals.

With the support received and the meetings held, the students involved in the project have the opportunity to expand their knowledge, particularly regarding overcoming the difficulties that arise daily. This support encompasses not only financial aspects but also addressing academic challenges and ensuring personal and emotional stability, with a view to staying in university and completing their studies under suitable and improved conditions. Thus, the shared experience of the "Juntas Somos Mais Fortes" project underscores the importance of governmental development of strategic retention policies that take into account the specific characteristics of each region of the country and provide continuous support to vulnerable students throughout their undergraduate studies.

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