

Academic demotivation: trying to understand reality**Desmotivação acadêmica: buscando compreender a realidade****Desmotivación académica: buscando comprender la realidad****Received: 01/06/2020****Approved: 28/10/2020****Published: 14/04/2021****Carolina Cassiano¹****Amanda Ribeiro Gonçalves²****Déborah Ribeiro Gonçalves³****Jurema Ribeiro Luiz Gonçalves⁴**

This is a qualitative research, which aimed to identify and describe the factors that lead to academic demotivation in a group of students at a public university. It took place in 2018, through semi-structured interviews. The information was analyzed according to the Collective Subject Discourse. The participants were eleven students from different courses, of which nine were female. Four categories were created: *Adaptive process, University context, Socioeconomic aspects and Emotional aspects*. It was identified that academic demotivation was due to: distancing from the family and the specificities of the new academic demand; infrastructure, activity overload and teaching conduct; financial dependence on parents; and feelings of sadness, nervousness, stress and irritability. Educational institutions must have an attentive and welcoming look towards their students through strategies to promote health and prevent injuries, in addition to considering the individual as a biopsychosocial and spiritual being, enabling improvement in the teaching-learning process and motivation.

Descriptors: Motivation; Students; Mental health; Academic failure; Universities.

Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, com o objetivo de identificar e descrever os fatores que levam à desmotivação acadêmica em um grupo de estudantes em uma universidade pública, realizada em 2018, através de entrevista semiestruturada. As informações foram analisadas segundo o Discurso do Sujeito Coletivo. Participaram 11 estudantes de diversos cursos, das quais nove do sexo feminino. Construiu-se quatro categorias: *Processo adaptativo, Contexto universitário, Aspectos socioeconômicos e Aspectos emocionais*. Identificou-se que a desmotivação acadêmica se deu por: distanciamento da família e as especificidades da nova demanda estudantil; infraestrutura, sobrecarga de atividades e conduta docente; dependência financeira em relação aos pais; e, sentimentos de tristeza, nervosismo, estresse e irritabilidade. As instituições de ensino precisam de um olhar atento e acolhedor para com seus estudantes através de estratégias para promover saúde e prevenir agravos, além de considerar o indivíduo como um ser biopsicossocial e espiritual, possibilitando melhora no processo ensino-aprendizagem e a motivação.

Descritores: Motivação; Estudantes; Saúde mental; Fracasso acadêmico; Universidades.

Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, cuyo objetivo es identificar y describir los factores que conducen a la desmotivación académica en un grupo de estudiantes de una universidad pública, realizada en 2018, a través de una entrevista semiestruturada. Las informaciones se analizaron según el Discurso del Sujeto Colectivo. Participaron 11 estudiantes de diferentes cursos, de los cuales nueve eran mujeres. Se construyeron cuatro categorías: *Proceso adaptativo, Contexto universitario, Aspectos socioeconómicos y Aspectos emocionales*. Se identificó que la desmotivación académica ocurrió por: la distancia de la familia y las especificidades de la nueva demanda estudiantil; la infraestructura, la sobrecarga de actividades y la conducta docente; la dependencia financiera en relación con los padres; y los sentimientos de tristeza, nerviosismo, estrés e irritabilidad. Las instituciones de enseñanza necesitan una mirada atenta y acogedora hacia sus alumnos a través de estrategias de promoción de la salud y prevención de enfermedades, además de considerar al individuo como un ser biopsicosocial y espiritual, permitiendo mejorar el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje y la motivación.

Descriptor: Motivación; Estudiantes; Salud mental; Fracaso escolar; Universidades.

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INTRODUCTION

The insertion in university life is a unique period that outlines the transition from high school to higher education, as well as the exit from adolescence and the beginning of adult life. University entrance must be analyzed based on a set of elements of a personal, social, economic and historical nature. The students are faced with new ways to study, live, learn and integrate with the academic environment¹.

The university environment presents students with a different social context in relation to what they are used to. It is at this moment that it is possible to observe the transition to adulthood, which requires maturity and adaptation, especially in order to remain in it². This transition phase and adaptive process are generally painful for the student, and the new demands can trigger significant emotional impacts³.

Some difficulties that can impact students in the academic context are: relationship problems, both between colleagues and with professors; differences between high school and higher education; financial difficulties; time management; deficient university infrastructure; missing the family; lack of support from family or friends⁴. Such impacts can generate anguish and frustration. Thus, the university environment that would assist in the consolidation of knowledge, allowing for better training for the professional future, is prone to cause illness⁵.

Sometimes, the lack of motivation to be at the university occurs due to a negative view on the conduct of professors, deficient physical structure and curriculum matrix⁶. Therefore, analyzing academic demotivation allows us to understand it as a critical determinant of the quality of university learning. Thus, the aim of this study was to identify and describe the factors that lead to academic demotivation in a group of students at a public university.

METHODS

This is a descriptive, observational study with a qualitative approach carried out at a public university, in the interior of the state of Minas Gerais, in 2018. This study is part of a larger project entitled "The influence of spirituality, religiosity, anxiety and depression on the motivation of the academics from a federal university".

The participants were students from various courses selected through a simple random sampling. The criteria for the selection of participants were: being 18 years of age or older, being enrolled and attending university and allow audio recording of the interview and having previously participated in a larger study.

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview, of a narrative type, with the guiding questions: "Have you been feeling unmotivated? Why have you been unmotivated?" and "Point out the factors that leave you unmotivated". The interviews were scheduled beforehand and took place at the university in individual and reserved rooms, according to the availability of the students, taking an average of 22 to 25 minutes.

The information extracted from the interviews was analyzed according to the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD), in which it allows the organization and tabulation of qualitative data obtained through interviews, applied to a certain community⁷. This method is supported by the epistemological principles of the Theory of Social Representations in order to seek to reconstruct such representations, preserving their individual importance articulated with their collective relevance, which are organized to convey a message about reality⁸.

The significant parts of these messages are the key expressions (KE). The synthesis of the content of a key expression is called the central idea (CI). The CSD is composed through KE and CI, in which the thinking of a group is presented as if it were an individual discourse and the information is grouped by means of similar discursive passages⁷.

Each recording was transcribed and the speeches divided into thematic categories. Based on the key expressions of each central idea, the Collective Subject Discourse was structured. Respondents were identified by the letter "E" followed by an Arabic number.

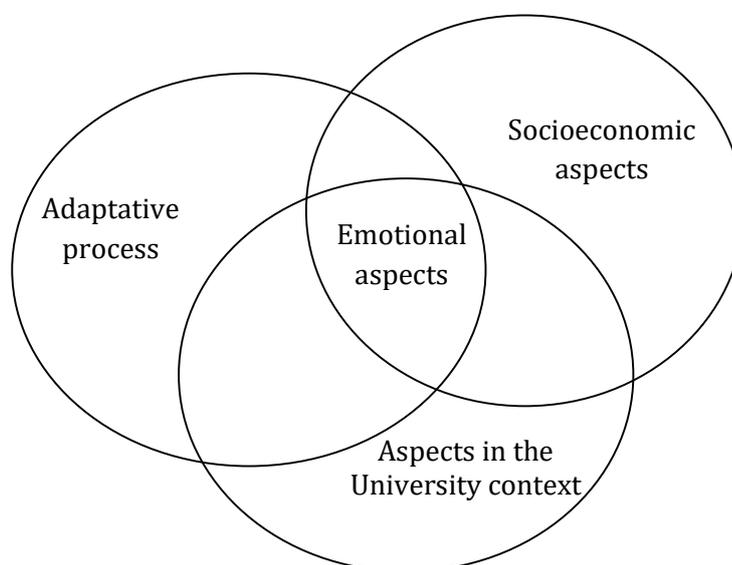
The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal do Triângulo Mineiro, under protocol 3,359,887. Each participant received the Free and Informed Consent Term according to CNS Resolution 466/12, as well as clarification about the objective of the study, guarantee of anonymity and total freedom to withdraw from the research at any time.

RESULTS

Twenty-one university students were selected and, of these, 11 participated in the study, of which 7 were from another state. Regarding gender, females prevailed with nine interviewees, of whom, the minimum age was 19 and the maximum was 53 years.

As for the courses, there were students from Biological Sciences (1), Nursing (1), Environmental Engineering (2), Production Engineering (1), Physical Therapy (2), Letters - Portuguese/English (1), Chemistry (1) and Social Work (2), between the third to the tenth semester. The results on the perception of university students in relation to factors arising from academic demotivation were grouped into four categories, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Thematic categories about academic demotivation, Uberaba, 2018.



Adaptative process

For students, insertion in higher education is permeated by a process of significant transformation, starting with the distancing from family and specificities of the new student demand, as verified in the CSD:

At the beginning of graduation I felt very unmotivated. Quite a bit. Because it is far from my parents, my family, everything is new. But what saddened me the most was to walk away from them and come here to be alone because I was far from everything, I was disoriented. Moving cities was complicated, the distance influenced a lot. When I got here, I saw the difficulty in what they expected from me, I came from a public school and teaching was very different. It's a completely different universe because we don't have classes, literally. At the private school and in cram school, teachers care about you, the class is very productive and it was shocking to come to college and see that the professors were not like that, they don't care about you, they give you the subjects that will be on the test, the average grade is one, two... So this makes me think: am I in the right course? Is this really what I want for myself? I didn't see myself in it. I don't know which area to go for, I pass the subjects and I don't know how to apply it. So it discourages me a lot. I thought: what am I "doing" here in college? Because I didn't like anything. I had expectations and when I got here I hated it. I spent the entire graduation not enjoying anything of the course. I had no desire to study, get the books, look at them... I was totally uninterested. I no longer wanted to see the subjects, everything discouraged me. At first I studied, but then I gave up. I didn't even go to class anymore. (E2; E3; E5; E6; E8; E10)

University context

It is observed in the speeches that the infrastructure, activities overload and teaching conduct are relevant factors for disinterest and demotivation:

The university requires a lot of unnecessary stuff and doesn't have enough practice. I thought: I'm going to learn a lot of cool things about mechanics... But I only saw math all day, math, math, I didn't understand anything, I didn't see anything practical. I couldn't pass anything, I couldn't go to any new courses. Then I saw that everyone was in the same situation. With that many students coming in, most just come and go, the library is overcrowded, the canteen is crowded, the classroom is big but it doesn't have air conditioning, the projectors don't work, it disrupts the school day. Too much pressure that leads me to question whether this is what I want for myself. Pressure from the university, a lot of stuff to read, a lot of things to do... Too much work, files, exams, seminars, each professors act as if they were the only one. You find yourself at a certain moment with a lot to do in a very short time. Depending on the professors, they do not help, do not collaborate. There are professors who demand a lot from the student there, they demand a lot from their subject and there is a very large number of subjects that demand a lot from you. There are professors that make you think: I'm not going to do this discipline until I get that other professor because with this one I can't at all. They are don't teach, the test is totally inconsistent with the content in the classroom, so you have to be self-taught. (E1; E10; E2; E6; E11)

Socioeconomic aspects

Many students are financially dependent on their parents. Many of them are saddened by this situation, as they yearn to work to acquire their independence:

I see my parents' struggle to give me the best and keep me here. It demotivates me because I am not "at work". I am supported by my parents and it makes me very upset because before I went to college, I paid everything myself, I already worked and everything. I can't work, I see the difficulty they have at home... I even thought: "I'm going to give up." But I had already paid rent, so I said: "I must keep going." And I still have two sisters who depend on my parents and that is a big burden because when I worked, I helped at home. (E8; E7; E5)

In order to ease the financial burden of parents or even assist in their self-maintenance, students resort to assistance offered by the educational institution:

So I depend on student aid and there are those questions, those forms to fill out, it feels like a type of humiliation. You depend on it, but you have to fill out forms. These are a lot of questions... That expose your life... I don't even know how to tell you... Unnecessary. (E8; E7; E5)

Emotional aspects

Feelings of sadness, nervousness, stress and irritability can be very evident in this trajectory combined with adversities in personal and family life, which also affect mental health, compromising academic performance and learning:

Before I was an extremely calm person, I was always a happy person, at ease with life, lively. Everyone says I was so upbeat and suddenly I started to be very sad, quiet, keep to myself, even my family realized this. I started to get very stressed, nervous, anxious. We get distressed. A little bit of anger at yourself, thinking that you were not competent to do what should have been done at the right time. Maybe having a very high expectation about me and seeing other people passing through college, passing subjects and I didn't, made me very upset. I thought that I was not going to make it, that I was useless that I was not going to be able to learn. I always compare myself with others. And if you watch a movie, do something during your free time, you feel guilty. During exam week, you don't eat well, you don't sleep well. Because the pressure is too great. If you score six it was supposed to be a good grade, but one point is missing for the next test so it gets really complicated. It affects you, it is a very strong sadness. It also affects a family/personal problem, having no incentive from someone, jokes that kind of subdue things. And there is pressure from the family "ah, you have to go to university, you have to graduate..." Then trying to take everything is very complicated. A lot on your back, then you want to throw everything up and stay in a fetal position in the room to empty your mind. (E2; E4; E6; E8; E10)

DISCUSSION

The insertion in university life is understood by the students as being a period permeated by transformations: the new routine, responsibilities, the importance of developing proactivity, in addition to the challenges due to the distance from the family⁹. This period is also linked to the decision to pursue a professional career that constitutes a struggle due to the difficulties of this new phase and also due to the identification of the course¹.

In a study carried out with 423 students from a public university and a Federal Institute of Education in the interior of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, it was found that the main academic difficulty observed was associated with the differences between high school and higher

education⁴. With regard to public schools, the gaps in knowledge is perceived by professors, since they verify the difficulties of students in issues of primary and secondary level, which impacts the college experience¹⁰.

The expectation of entering university and finding a teaching methodology different from what they are used to during high school makes students idealize different attitudes from professors so that they can help in their difficulties. This situation can impact the adaptive process and lead to withdrawals¹¹.

A research carried out with 24 psychology students at the Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro divided them into two groups (one participated in psychotherapy and the other did not) showed that those who participated in psychotherapy had a higher level of academic adaptation. As for the other group, there was no significant increase in this investigated dimension.

Therefore, the psychotherapeutic group can act as a protective factor, helping students in their adaptive process, especially in the first year of college. In addition, personal and interpersonal dimensions were also analyzed. Students who participated in group psychotherapy developed characteristics such as the ability to put themselves in the other's place, understanding differences and feelings, collaboration between peers, intensification of bonds, conviction about the choice of course and taste for the university².

A bibliographic study investigated the views on active teaching methodologies by professors. The results showed that there was a prevalence of traditional methodologies in academic life and professors have little knowledge about new teaching methods¹².

In another study carried out in three universities in the South of Brazil, with 258 nursing students, it was found that more dynamic classes in which there are also problematization and group work presented themselves as facilitating teaching methods and were capable of subsidizing professional practice in future. In this sense, it is relevant for professors to diversify methodologies so that students are more involved, but they can also seek alternatives that help them in their learning¹³.

A study carried out with 23 students at three Japanese universities found that demotivation was associated with teaching, and the restrictive environment and discouraging teaching approaches were decisive for the prevalence of demotivation¹⁴. In this way, the importance of promoting teaching with diversified strategies is perceived, favoring the students' involvement, motivating them to follow the classes and also feeling motivated to attend them.

When entering a higher education course, there may be a lack of identification with the course as the semesters progress, so that the student may experience a feeling of uncertainty about the profession, with demotivation during the course and, consequently, lack of interest in carrying out academic activities.

A study carried out with students from different courses at a private university in São Paulo showed university life as stress-inducing, mainly due to the overload of activities¹⁵. The high workload makes students feel trapped at the university and consider the routine overloaded.

The precariousness of the institution's infrastructure, with no physical spaces for living and leisure and ineffective lighting, makes the university routine more difficult, especially for those students who need to stay at the university for long periods of the day¹⁶. These results corroborate the results of this research and, as well as being stressful, they can also be included as triggering aspects of demotivation.

The professors also play an important role in the context of motivation. A professor who is seen as a model for their students has attributes based on a good interpersonal relationship, teaching skills with an emphasis on didactics, creativity and a liking for the profession, in addition to professionalism, based on ethics and knowledge¹⁷. The professor must act fairly and avoid unnecessary harm or suffering to students¹⁸.

In another study carried out with Nursing, Medicine and Dentistry students from a public university in Southern Brazil, the best professors were seen as empathetic, capable of establishing a bond and intervening in the face of learning needs. In addition to the ability to master the subject and teaching skills, students seek professors with sensitivity to assist them. In other words, it is not enough to just be a professor with technical-scientific knowledge; more than that, you need to be an empathetic professional. This makes students register them as better due to this subjective dimension¹⁹. For this reason, the professor-student relationship is seen as an important element, causing successful learning or being an obstacle to motivation²⁰.

In a study carried out with ten students from a public university in the extreme North of Brazil, with different courses, five interviewees commented on the impossibility of working due to the course being full time, but they would like to be able to be financially independent and also contribute with their family income. However, they needed to dedicate themselves to university. In addition, the fact that many students feel that their family demand their quick insertion on the job market¹⁶. It is inferred that even with the democratization of higher education in recent years, there are difficulties in enabling the permanence of students who are economic vulnerable.

For students in a situation of economic vulnerability, student aid serves as a supplement to their income, which contributes to their permanence. However, for many, aid is a substantial source of income, which shows a deficiency in public policies that should provide people with minimum subsistence conditions²¹.

When the student is dependent of some of aid, there may be a feeling of shame, since dependence puts them in an uncomfortable and embarrassing position. Denial of this place leads many people to interpret aid as a "right" and not a "benefit"²². In many cases, the inclusion of these students is carried out through exclusion processes. The assessment procedures are restricted to contact with the student and the presentation of supporting documentation of the situations referred to, especially family income²¹.

With regard to self-esteem, from the moment the student enters the university, there may be a change regarding their self-perception²³. And, their self-esteem can be directly affected, especially when there is a feeling of worthlessness and comparison with other colleagues who perhaps stand out in the academic environment.

In relation to leisure, a study carried out with 134 university students in the interior of São Paulo found that they have little time for leisure activities such as rest, fun, personal and social development. It is noteworthy that the dimensions of leisure in human life enable the formation of more critical and creative beings²⁴. It is possible that the excess of activities makes many students feel guilty for practicing leisure activities. This fact is also associated with immersion in the academic environment, leading students to prioritize all student demands at the expense of their quality of life.

As for emotional aspects, a study carried out with 558 students from public and private colleges in the interior of the state of São Paulo from different areas and semesters, showed that there were significant anxious and depressive symptoms, which could present some anxiety or depression disorder²⁵.

The challenges of academic life are based on the cognitive issue, but, for many students, the biggest challenge in facing higher education is associated with emotional aspects. Personal and family problems can directly impact academic life, as well as concentration and, consequently, learning²⁶. An investigation carried out with 3706 university students in the United Kingdom and 3271 in Egypt found that, as a result of university life, the most frequent complaints of students in both countries were: fatigue, nervousness, difficulty concentrating and headaches²⁷. In another study with 749 Norwegian university students, 17% (127) reported severe symptoms of psychological distress, with four times more chances of low self-efficacy and two times more chances of reporting delayed student progress²⁸.

Support in its various modalities becomes substantial, as students will be better emotionally and more adapted to face the challenges of academic life. In many circumstances, classmates are supportive and play the role of family, as many students need to move away from family members. Colleagues have a supportive function, even when there is an environment of competition and lack of unity²⁹. Thus, it is necessary to identify mental health problems, on the part of a student attendance system³⁰.

The context of academic life, as well as its relational aspects, have a direct association with the psychological distress of students; and, such elements can be modified, being crucial interventional actions, aimed at improving the living conditions at the university and the well-being of its students³¹.

CONCLUSION

Lack of motivation surrounds the lives of many university students and is related to intrinsic and extrinsic aspects, so that further studies that investigate demotivation in the academic environment are needed.

The university must be a space for the formation of better people and professionals, in addition to encouraging motivation and knowledge. Therefore, recognizing the weaknesses liable to intervention can modify the current scenario of unmotivated students.

Educational institutions need an attentive and welcoming look towards their students through strategies to promote health and prevent health issues, in addition to considering the individual as a biopsychosocial and spiritual being, thus enabling improvements in the teaching-learning process and motivation.

As limitations of this study, there is the non-inclusion of all courses and the possibility that contexts of particular institutions may have different dynamics, not investigated here. On the other hand, this research brings a reading of students from a public institution that may reflect the reality of several other institutions, mediated here by the search to understand the phenomenon in depth and not to quantify it. A format for contributing to the understanding of academic demotivation.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Carolina Cassiano worked in the conception, collection and analysis of data and writing. **Amanda Ribeiro Gonçalves** participated in the writing and reviewing. **Déborah Ribeiro Gonçalves** contributed to the conception, collection and analysis of the data. **Jurema Ribeiro Luiz Gonçalves** was responsible for data analysis, writing and reviewing.

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