

Decisions of a federal university regarding the undergraduate training during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This study aimed to describe the main decisions that the university implemented to guarantee the quality of training in the period of coping with COVID-19, based on a documental study in publicly accessible sources of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, with a temporal cut from March 2020 to June 2022. The guiding question was: what are the main decisions that the university has been taking to guarantee the quality of training in the period of coping with COVID-19? A total of 75 documents were analyzed - resolutions, notes, and releases – in which the main measures were related to changes in the teaching modality: remote, hybrid and classroom classes, in addition to health measures to protect the faculty and students, and the release of aid to benefit students in vulnerability. In view of this, it is understood that the decisions taken by the university during the pandemic were aimed at reducing the impacts on the social, health, and education areas of academics.

Keywords

COVID-19; education; pandemic; implications for training.

Decisões de uma universidade federal referente à formação na graduação durante a pandemia de Covid-19

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo é descrever as principais decisões que a universidade implementou para garantir a qualidade da formação no período de enfrentamento da Covid-19 a partir de um estudo documental em fontes de acesso público da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, com corte temporal de março de 2020 a junho de 2022. A questão norteadora foi: quais as principais decisões que a universidade vem tendo para garantir qualidade da formação no período de enfrentamento da Covid-19? Foram analisados 75 documentos – resoluções, notas e comunicados; as principais medidas foram referentes às mudanças na modalidade de ensino: remoto, híbrido e aulas presenciais, além de medidas sanitárias para a proteção do corpo docente e discente, e liberação de auxílios para beneficiar estudantes em vulnerabilidade. Diante

disso, entende-se que as decisões tomadas pela universidade durante a pandemia visaram reduzir os impactos nas áreas social, da saúde e da educação dos acadêmicos.

Palavras-chave

Covid-19; educação; pandemia; implicações na formação.

**La creación de la Escuela Doméstica Nossa Senhora do Amparo
para la formación de mujeres****Resumen**

El objetivo de este estudio es describir las principales decisiones que la universidad implementó para garantizar la calidad de la formación en el período de enfrentamiento al Covid-19 a partir de un estudio documental en fuentes de acceso público de la Universidad Federal de Río de Janeiro, con un corte temporal de marzo de 2020 a junio de 2022. La pregunta orientadora fue: ¿cuáles son las principales decisiones que ha venido tomando la universidad para garantizar la calidad de la formación en el período de enfrentamiento al Covid-19? Se analizaron 75 documentos – resoluciones, notas y comunicados; las principales medidas estuvieron relacionadas con cambios en la modalidad de enseñanza: clases a distancia, híbridas y presenciales, además de medidas sanitarias para proteger a docentes y estudiantes, y liberación de ayudas en beneficio de estudiantes en vulnerabilidad. Ante ello, se entiende que las decisiones tomadas por la universidad durante la pandemia estuvieron encaminadas a reducir los impactos en las áreas social, de salud y educativa de los académicos.

Palabras clave

Covid-19; educación; pandemia; implicaciones para el entrenamiento.

1 Introduction

The year 2020 saw one of the biggest global health crises. This is because, in December 2019, in the city of Wuhan, China, the first case of the new coronavirus was reported, a microorganism belonging to the Coronaviridae family, known to be responsible for causing outbreaks of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) (Brazil, 2021). The new virus quickly spread to other countries, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) in January 2020, as the disease had already been reported in around 19 countries. In Brazil, the first case was reported a month later, in February 2020 (Paho, 2020).

However, the rapid transmissibility of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its high lethality led the WHO to declare, on March 11, 2020, a pandemic of the new coronavirus, given the rapid advance of the disease around the world, currently affecting around 114

countries (Paho, 2020). As a result, prevention and clinical management actions had to be taken. The main measures included social isolation/distancing, quarantine, and the adoption of hygiene habits, given that transmission of the virus in question occurs through contact with droplets from contaminated people, contaminated surfaces, and aerosols (Brazil, 2021a). However, it is important to note that the implementation and content of the measures varied from state to state.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, where the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) is located, the first measure that impacted education was determined on March 13, 2020, since Article 4 of Decree No. 46,970 determined the suspension of on-site classes for 15 days. Subsequently, UFRJ itself, by publishing a technical note on March 23, 2020, "[...] decided to maintain the suspension of classes for an indefinite period". As a result, face-to-face teaching was suspended for more than a year and the main alternative adopted was remote teaching. However, with the progress of the vaccination campaign, the activities began to be developed in a hybrid format and today they are fully on-site.

Educational institutions had to readjust their programs and plan different ways of developing teaching activities in response to the serious health crisis and, consequently, reformulate the new education model. This reconfiguration of the education system served as an alternative solution to the teaching-learning process, giving continuity to academic activities developed remotely, using Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICT) (Silva *et al.*, 2021). DICT continued to be adopted even with the return of some face-to-face activities, which began to take place after students and teachers took the first dose of the coronavirus vaccine, this period being called hybrid teaching (Camacho; Souza, 2021). Priority on-site teaching only returned as a teaching method at UFRJ in 2022, with the publication of Resolution No. 27/2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic is now three years old and many adjustments are still being made to ensure quality education. The aim of this study is therefore to describe the main decisions that UFRJ has taken to guarantee the quality of education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Methodology

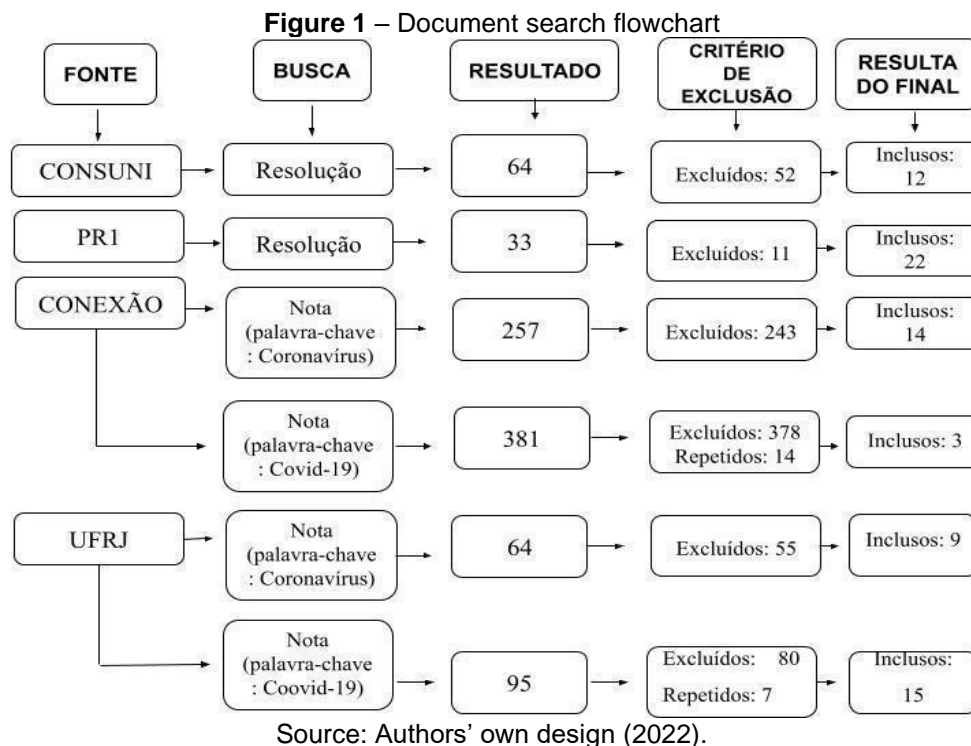
This is a descriptive and exploratory documentary study with a qualitative approach, conducted by teachers and students of the undergraduate nursing course at the School of Nursing Anna Nery at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (EEAN/UFRJ). The documents analyzed were available on UFRJ's public access sources, including the UFRJ website, the UFRJ University Council (Consuni), the Conexão UFRJ website, and the Undergraduate Pro-Rector (PR1/UFRJ). The research was done in July 2022 and the time frame of the search was from March 2020 - the period when COVID-19 began - to June 2022. The guiding question was: what are the main decisions that the university has been taking to guarantee the quality of training during the COVID-19 pandemic?

To answer the established question, the research sought documents published by UFRJ that pointed to decisions with a direct influence on the training of undergraduate students. The inclusion criteria established were: UFRJ resolutions, technical notes, and guidelines published during the pandemic that dealt with the readjustment of activities and the academic calendar (suspension of classes, Exceptional Teaching Period – ETP – remote teaching, hybrid teaching and return to face-to-face classes), student financial aid, academic graduation process and sanitary protection measures. As an exclusion criterion, it was established that COVID-19 issues related to UFRJ professionals, administrative calendars, postgraduate activities, and the revalidation of undergraduate diplomas for foreign students would not be selected.

The search on the Consuni website and PR1 was for resolutions published in the timeframe of the study, while the keywords "coronavirus" and "COVID-19" were used on the UFRJ website and Conexão UFRJ. The data was organized in an Excel spreadsheet with the following information: type of document, date of publication, source, and main subject covered in the document. Thematic content analysis was then carried out. The research respected the principles of Resolution 510/2016, as it used information in the public domain.

3 Results and discussion

The search results will be presented in flowchart format, showing the following information: source, search, results, exclusion criteria, and final result. A total of 75 documents were selected, including 34 resolutions and 41 notes and communications, as shown in Figure 1.



According to an analysis of the information shared by UFRJ in its resolutions, notes, and announcements, published on the university's official websites, it was possible to observe the process of chronological evolution of the decisions taken regarding the training of students enrolled in UFRJ's undergraduate course. These measures adopted by the university to ensure the quality of the academic year will be presented in three thematic categories that represent the three main teaching modalities adopted by UFRJ during the COVID-19 pandemic: remote teaching, hybrid teaching, and the return of on-site teaching. In this context, the results were discussed on the basis of a reflection based on related national and international scientific literature and the university's own documents.

3.1 Remote teaching

Following the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, a series of government measures were implemented to protect and prevent the population from contracting the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Silva; Fumes, 2023). Thus, based on the obligation of social isolation, UFRJ suspended undergraduate academic activities for an indefinite period in order to comply with the emergency recommendations of public health agencies. In this sense, it was necessary to use new social, economic, and educational strategies to continue higher education in the country (UFRJ, 2020) (Brasil, 2020a).

In order to enable education, UFRJ developed curricular adaptations as a solution to the current problem. The first emergency resolution published was Resolution No. 1/2020, which provided for graduation during the COVID-19 pandemic period, and the second was Resolution No. 2/2020, which provided for the defense of undergraduate coursework during the same period. Both events, important for the students' education, had to be held remotely via videoconference.

The remote modality began to be adopted for teaching from Ordinance No. 343, published on March 17, 2020, which determined remote teaching as a fundamental alternative for this period (Brasil, 2020a). However, after the rector's evaluative research with the team from the Pro-Rector for Student Policies (PR-7) on socioeconomic issues, social vulnerability, accessibility to the Internet and technological equipment for low-income university students, it was observed that there was a need to create financial aid programs so that it would be possible to promote the democratic and equal return of curricular activities through remote teaching (Conexão UFRJ, 2021).

The financial aid programs aimed to: "Democratize and expand the conditions of permanence at UFRJ, providing undergraduate or graduate students in a situation of socio-economic vulnerability with the technical conditions necessary for internet access" (Pró-Reitor de Políticas Estudantis, 2021).

In this sense, Digital Inclusion Aid, COVID-19 Emergency Aid, and Emergency Meal Delivery Aid were distributed. These aids are governed by Consuni Resolution 2/2019. However, with the aim of democratizing education, the Undergraduate Teaching Council (CEG) was authorized by Consuni to change the Academic Calendar if the

conditions for digital inclusion (Sindcard and equipment) and Temporary Emergency Aid were not implemented as planned (Conexão UFRJ, 2020; UFRJ/PR1, 2020).

The reorganization of the academic curriculum generated new questions about the adaptations to remote teaching and how they would be developed during the school term. With this in mind, UFRJ sought to minimize the impact on learning in the face of the emergence of the new education model with the implementation of ETP, offering a curricular advance and training in the new dynamics of remote teaching, as well as ensuring the student's right if it was not possible to return to academic activities during that period. In this way, it would be possible to observe the system's challenges and academic needs in the midst of the new learning methodology.

The ETP lasted from August 24 to November 16, 2020, accounting for a semester of 12 weeks, which is shorter than the usual six weeks. The ETP was made available following a synchronous and asynchronous pedagogical organization. Synchronous activities are characterized by the interaction between the teacher and the students in real-time since everyone takes part in the activities in the virtual environment at the same time. Asynchronous activities, on the other hand, are disconnected in terms of time and space from online interaction, as they are remote activities. However, the teacher-student relationship does not take place in real time, and students can organize these activities according to their availability (Antunes; Porto; Queiroz, 2022).

According to CEG Resolution No. 4/2020, ETP activities should preferably be asynchronous, with classes recorded, respecting the image and voice rights of those who prepared the didactic-pedagogical material. In general, these activities were organized by recorded activities and/or materials made available for study (UFRJ/PR1, 2020).

The Undergraduate Teaching Council (CEG), through Resolution 3/2020, made it exceptionally possible to withdraw from subjects and enrollment justified by the pandemic at any time, since remote teaching activities were optional for the student body. Thus, during the ETP it was not allowed to fail by absences or penalties concerning the impossibility of adhering to subjects or remote activities. In addition, the resumption of remote pedagogical activities after the re-establishment of the regular UFRJ calendar was ensured for students who chose not to carry out activities during the ETP. Students in this situation had their places reserved in the Integrated Academic Management

System (IAMS) and, when subjects were offered, they were enrolled by the coordinator, via direct enrollment (UFRJ/PR1, 2020).

Still during the ETP, in July 2020, in order to comply with the curriculum of the courses and their on-site activities such as mandatory internships, the university established guidelines and complementary rules for curricular and extracurricular internships for undergraduate courses during the COVID-19 pandemic period, through CEG Resolution No. 6/2020. This document now authorizes these internships to be carried out inside and outside UFRJ, following safety and biosafety recommendations and guidelines (CEG, 2020).

Through the publication of Resolution No. 9/2020, made available by the CEG, it became possible to transition the ETP to the regular 2020 academic term in remote mode. With this transition, the activities developed in the ETP would be part of the regular semester 2020.1. In addition, for the restart of the school year, some rights were provided for students, among them: no failure for attendance exclusively during remote teaching, enrollment lock with an extended period, and the permanence of the guarantee in the priority of enrollment of the student who did not opt for remote pedagogical activities in the resumption of on-site academic activities at UFRJ (CEG, 2020).

That said, it was established that the 2020 academic term should be held in two periods: the first academic term of the year would be from November 30, 2020, to March 6, 2021, thus comprising 14 weeks, while the second academic term of the year would be offered from March 22, 2021, to June 12, 2021, thus having 12 weeks of activities, with only two weeks of vacation between each period (CEG, 2020). In this way, one of the main characteristics of emergency remote education can be seen: the reduction in the length of teaching periods, when compared to the regular on-site teaching period, characterized by 18 to 19 weeks of activities and three weeks of vacation between periods.

In order to operate the school year in remote mode in 2021, the CEG had some rules, which included the types of remote teaching activities that could be used, such as activities mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), synchronous and asynchronous, according to technological availability; the provision of content organized on virtual teaching and learning platforms, e-mail, among others; the provision of teaching materials to students, with the appropriate pedagogical guidelines; guidance

on reading, projects, research, activities and exercises indicated in the teaching materials; and ICT-mediated assessments, also establishing the cases and conditions that ensured the right to second call assessments (CEG, 2021).

Regarding curricular and extracurricular internships for undergraduate courses, the guidelines of Resolution No. 6/2020 published in the ETP remained. However, Resolution No. 2/2021 allowed academic units to develop internships of up to 30 hours per week during the pandemic on an emergency basis (CEG, 2021).

Given the entire process of change during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency and the implementation of emergency remote teaching, some characteristics of the educational process can be seen, such as the limitations of time, planning, training, and technical support for teaching classes using learning platforms, which is a possible factor in compromising the quality of undergraduate education (Gusso *et al.*, 2020). However, it is necessary to carry out surveys with students to find out if there has in fact been any compromise in the quality of their training. It is therefore understood that, although remote teaching allows for greater autonomy in terms of time management for studies, given the easy availability of slides and reading materials on online platforms without the need to travel to the educational institution and to be frequently present during the classes administered, there are other factors that together imply the student's learning in its entirety, such as the fact that remote classes require greater discipline, commitment, and motivation from the student since the student-teacher and student-coordinator relationship becomes more impaired. In addition, the place of study can influence learning and the numerous external distracting factors can interfere with the student's attention in their study environment (Lima, 2020).

3.2 Hybrid teaching

The federal institution follows its conduct backed by current legislation and values quality teaching for the training of future professionals and researchers. It agrees with Law No. 11.788 of 2008, which defines internships as a "[...] supervised school educational act, developed in the work environment, which aims to prepare students who are attending regular education in higher education institutions for productive work [...]" and, in addition, "[...] aims to learn skills specific to professional activity and to

contextualize the curriculum, aiming to develop students for citizen life and work" (Brasil, 2008). Therefore, we can see the importance and necessity of the compulsory curricular internships that many undergraduate courses have for their professional training.

Faced with the new model of teaching offered remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, several classes at the federal university experienced delays in their training, since, although remote teaching provided progress in theoretical academic studies, the obligation to complete curricular internships prevented them from continuing and completing their degree. Therefore, the suspension of on-site activities had a direct impact on the students' learning time.

Hybrid teaching, according to Pasini, Carvalho, and Almeida (2020), is described as a proposal that seeks to integrate the elements of on-site and remote teaching. Therefore, based on this concept, it can be considered that, as of CEG Resolution No. 6, of July 2020, UFRJ began to adopt aspects of hybrid teaching as an exceptional option. In other words, even in the period portrayed as remote teaching, characteristics of on-site teaching are beginning to be introduced.

In addition, the approach taken by UFRJ – hybrid teaching – can improve the interaction between student and teacher, as this reorganization allows for the development of satisfactory theoretical learning in a free and creative way, as students increase their autonomy, collaboration, responsibility, and commitment (Silva, 2018). However, the main negative aspect of this methodology continues to be the compulsory requirement of technological tools (Souza; Andrade, 2016), causing some obstacles in training and learning. In addition to this, there were numerous insecurities on the part of the students concerning on-site activities, including the fear of becoming infected and thus infecting their families, and also of delaying their training if they had to spend a long time on sick leave and were unable to complete the minimum 75% attendance in practical activities set out in CEG Resolution 15/1971.

Throughout the pandemic, UFRJ has adopted a number of measures to overcome some of the challenges, but in difficult and fickle times, the institution has tried as best it can to meet the needs of its students. Higher education could not be sustained in the remote mode for long, as has already been pointed out, as there is a need to carry out compulsory practical activities in order to complete courses. Therefore, the best time for a gradual return to face-to-face activities began to be studied and debated by the

spheres responsible for undergraduate courses. Thus, guidelines were made available for the elaboration of the plan for the gradual return of practical teaching activities in undergraduate courses (UFRJ, 2021d, 2021e).

In October 2021, according to the Rio de Janeiro Epidemiological Bulletin, the lethality rate, along with the mortality rate, fell considerably compared to the same period the previous year. The epidemiological status of the city of Rio de Janeiro had improved. Through this plan and guidelines for a gradual return, the UFRJ Teaching and Graduation Council, through Resolution No. 9, published in October 2021, determined the start of the hybrid teaching modality for all courses during the 2021 academic period. However, it is worth noting that, during the ETP, the courses were developing remote and face-to-face activities, which constitutes hybrid teaching, but it was only after the publication of this resolution that this modality was actually formalized at UFRJ.

The partial return to on-site teaching, called hybrid teaching, would only take place for students who had been vaccinated. This decision was emphasized by the CEG through Resolution 13/2021, which kept the provisions of the aforementioned resolution in force. In addition, some assignments are made for this new period, characterized by hybrid teaching, among them the on-site and remote activities that continued to occur without approval by attendance.

3.3 Return of the on-site classes

Throughout 2020, there were certain orders for the institution to return to its face-to-face activities, such as Ordinance No. 1,038/2021, from the Ministry of Education, which provided for "[...] the return to on-site classes and the exceptional use of digital educational resources to complete the workload of pedagogical activities, for the duration of the pandemic situation of the new coronavirus" (Brasil, 2021b). However, through some news and notes, UFRJ stated that it would continue to carry out its activities in the remote modality. This situation lasted until 2021, when the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF) filed a civil lawsuit demanding the return of on-site classes by October 18, 2021, at federal higher education institutions (UFRJ, 2021).

UFRJ, like other higher education institutions, took a position in favor of this return to the classroom, but respecting the "[...] planning autonomy of each one of them"

(UFRJ, 2021). This autonomy was ratified by the Federal Court, which did not accept the MPF's request for a return to the classroom, as it understood that the institution's autonomy should prevail (UFRJ, 2021). However, before the court order, UFRJ presented a counter-proposal for conciliation with the MPF regarding the return to on-site classes (UFRJ, 2021). This counter-proposal included a return to on-site classes for all subjects only at the beginning of the 2022.1 semester, which only occurred in April 2022 (UFRJ, 2021).

In addition, over time, the pandemic has eased, with many establishments reopening thanks to the development, distribution, and application of vaccination against the new coronavirus. As a result, the lethality of the disease decreased, even during peak episodes. In March 2022, although more than 400,000 cases had already been recorded, the mortality rate stood at 18.3 and the case-fatality rate at 0.3% (Center..., 2022), in other words, the latter rate was much lower compared to the same time the previous year, which, in March, stood at 7%, with a similar mortality rate (18.8), but with fewer cases (around 17,000) (Center..., 2021). The main difference between these two moments is how advanced vaccination against COVID-19 was: in March 2021, only 450,000 doses had been applied (Emergency Operations Center, 2021), while in March 2022, vaccination had already reached the mark of more than 14 million doses applied (Center..., 2022).

Considering this context, the Multidisciplinary Working Group for Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic at UFRJ (GT-Coronavirus) released a technical note that recommended "[...] the resumption of all on-site activities at UFRJ in the first academic term of 2022, understanding that it is necessary to maintain the mandatory use of masks and offer facilities for hand hygiene" (GT-Coronavirus, 2022). With this in mind, on March 20, 2022, the university launched the *Guidelines for the full on-site return of UFRJ*, a guiding document for carrying out this process. This document reinforced the requirement for proof of vaccination, the mandatory use of masks, and hand hygiene for the on-site return of undergraduate teaching activities (UFRJ, 2022a).

Thus, on March 30, 2022, the CEG published Resolution No. 27, which "Provides for the operating rules of the 2022 academic year to be held in the face-to-face mode". The main rules in question included that: the student could withdraw from enrolling in a subject, with the authorization of the supervising teacher, provided that 60% of the

ordinary teaching period had not yet elapsed; exceptionally, the student's approval by a final grade equal to or greater than 5.0 and attendance equal to or greater than 50% of the subject's workload (CEG, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, the minimum attendance required to pass the course was 75% or more of the teaching time (CEG, 1971). In addition, students could previously only withdraw from a course with the authorization of the supervising professor, as long as $\frac{1}{4}$ of the regular teaching period had not yet elapsed (CEG, 1971).

These flexibilities reveal the university's commitment to offering possibilities that do not hinder student performance in on-site teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is important to assess the impact of teaching with so much effort, in order to verify the quality of the training of these students who have experienced their training in the midst of a pandemic, with the aim of learning from this unique experience and preparing for new health crises that may arise.

In addition to the recommendations for COVID-19 prevention set out by UFRJ, as mentioned above, the institution has established a testing strategy for the resumption of face-to-face activities. This document consists of a series of instructions for the entire university body, in order to help identify the infection as early as possible, both through self-assessment of common signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and through free testing at the UFRJ Diagnostic Screening Center. It was recommended that symptomatic, pre-symptomatic, and people who had recently had close contact with an infected person be tested and, in case they tested positive, they were advised to remain in isolation for a period of ten days, with a minimum of seven days. There was also the possibility of a new test ten days after the onset of symptoms for those who had tested positive for the disease, in order to control the negative viral load (UFRJ, 2022b).

At the moment, UFRJ continues with its on-site activities, the country continues to see a decrease in the number of deaths and the number of COVID-19 cases (Centro..., 2022). The last technical note until the construction of this study was the suspension of the mandatory use of masks in closed spaces on UFRJ campuses. However, the committee of researchers that advises the rector's office recommends that the university continues to encourage the wearing of masks by its staff.

4 Closing remarks

It can be concluded that the strategies and adaptations used by UFRJ during the COVID-19 pandemic were necessary to reduce the impact on the students' social, health, and education areas. In this sense, UFRJ's positioning in the pandemic world, through resolutions, notes, and guidelines, was based on preventive measures and care, with the aim of safeguarding the lives of teachers and students in this scenario.

Faced with the global and national outlook in relation to the numbers of infected cases and deaths, UFRJ was evaluating and making notes on the best way to continue teaching and learning. It was necessary to go through several processes, such as remote teaching, exceptional teaching, remote regular teaching period, hybrid teaching, and, finally, the return of on-site classes.

It should be noted that during this period, in addition to the demands of educational adaptations, UFRJ promoted benefits aimed at helping students in socio-economic vulnerability. In this context, digital inclusion aid, emergency COVID-19 aid, and emergency meal delivery aid were distributed, aiming to democratize access to education.

Finally, this documentary research sought to understand and report on the measures implemented by UFRJ and analyze their effects based on scientific literature, bringing reflections for new studies that seek to evaluate the impact of the training of students during the COVID-19 pandemic, because, in the midst of so many adaptations in the training of undergraduate courses due to the pandemic, it is necessary to evaluate the impact of emergency teaching on the training of students who have experienced this model of education, since there is much to learn from this unique experience.

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