

From The Worst To The Best: A Critical View On Higher Education In Brazil Based On Data From The 2022 Higher Education Census (Censup)

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Abstract:

This study assesses Higher Education in Brazil using data from the 2022 Higher Education Census by Inep/MEC. Employing a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analyses, the study identifies significant disparities in education, particularly in the North and Northeast regions, reflecting socioeconomic and racial inequalities. Enrollment rates fall short of the targets set by the National Education Plan, and there are pronounced differences between public and private institutions, especially in terms of dropout rates and quality in distance learning (EaD) courses, as well as gender disparities. However, there are advancements such as an increase in average schooling and improvements in earnings among young people, and public institutions stand out for their quality. Programs like Fies and ProUni have shown positive impacts in reducing disparities. The study suggests the need to expand EaD in public institutions, increase funding for these, better regulate private institutions, and encourage female participation in science and technology fields, aiming for a more robust and equitable educational system in Brazil.

Keywords: Higher Education; Undergraduate; Censup; Higher Education Census; Brazil.

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I. Introduction

The higher education system in Brazil is experiencing a unique moment, marked by both challenges and unprecedented opportunities. This study aims to delve into the intricacies of this vital component of the Brazilian educational system, highlighting the nuances emerging from the data provided by the 2022 Higher Education Census (Censup). Higher education is often regarded as a driver of economic growth and personal development. However, the Brazilian reality reveals a complex scenario, marked by regional, socioeconomic, and racial disparities, which are clearly reflected in the Censup data.

The general objective of this study is to analyze the current landscape of higher education in Brazil based on the data from the 2022 Censup. Three specific objectives guide this analysis: to understand the defining characteristics of higher education, identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current system, and propose strategies to enhance positive aspects and overcome negative ones, capitalizing on opportunities and mitigating threats.

Employing a mixed-method, explanatory-descriptive approach, this research conducts a detailed analysis of the 2022 Censup data. The investigation aims to identify patterns, trends, and deviations that illustrate the state of higher education in the country. It considers significant variables such as the population's educational attainment and its direct influence on the demand for higher education, as well as the characteristics of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)—including their location, administrative category, and academic organization.

The rationale for this investigation stems from the urgent need to understand and improve the higher education system in Brazil, which represents a critical pillar for national development. The updated 2022 Censup data provide a rich foundation for addressing the complexities of this educational segment, marked by significant regional, socioeconomic, and racial disparities. This study aims to unravel and understand these disparities and their impacts on higher education, contributing to the formulation of policies and strategies that promote quality and accessible education.

Moreover, the study examines key indicators such as enrollment and graduation rates, student retention and success, and faculty performance to offer insights into the efficiency and effectiveness of HEIs. By evaluating these metrics, the research seeks to highlight the equity of the system, emphasizing the need for strategies that foster inclusive and equitable educational opportunities, especially for underrepresented groups.

II. Higher Education: Concepts, Characteristics, And Organization

Higher education in Brazil, regulated by the Law of Guidelines and Bases (LDB), Law No. 9,394/96, encompasses a vast network of universities, university centers, and colleges dedicated to teaching, research, and extension activities (Brasil, 1996). Universities stand out for their autonomy guaranteed by the LDB and their mission to promote scientific and cultural development (Brasil, 1996). Higher education has seen significant progress since the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in 1808, which established the first medical and law schools (Schwartz, 1988; Fausto, 1995).

Although access to higher education has expanded, challenges such as regional disparities and the need for alignment with labor market demands persist (Brasil, 1996). Student financing programs and inclusion policies, such as affirmative actions, have contributed to greater democratization, despite persistent socioeconomic and racial disparities.

Paulo Freire (2005) and Edgar Morin (2000) offer valuable perspectives for understanding and improving higher education. Freire emphasizes the importance of participatory and critical education, while Morin advocates for complex and transdisciplinary thinking, suited to contemporary challenges.

Jane Knight (2004) highlights the relevance of internationalization in preparing students for global contexts, addressing financial and cultural challenges. Internationalization initiatives aim to adapt curricula to global trends and transnational challenges (De Wit, 2011).

The relationship between higher education and employability is emphasized by Simon Schwartzman (2005), who underscores the importance of cross-cutting competencies. Fernando Dolabela (2008) highlights the growing importance of entrepreneurship in higher education.

The Quota Law (Brasil, 2012) and the ProUni Program (Brasil, 2005) are milestones in democratizing access to higher education, promoting the inclusion of historically excluded groups and contributing to greater educational equity.

Student movements, especially the National Union of Students (UNE), have played an important role in the history of educational reforms in Brazil (Teixeira, 1989; Souza, 2003). Student actions were crucial in driving significant changes, advocating for a more democratic and accessible higher education system.

Brazilian higher education continues to face challenges in expanding access and ensuring quality (Schwartzman, 2015). The need for continuous innovation is essential to maintain the relevance of education in a rapidly changing global landscape (Ristoff, 2014).

III. Quality Of Higher Education In Brazil

The quality of higher education in Brazil is crucial for social, economic, and cultural progress, extending beyond technical skills to encompass citizenship and sustainable development (Saccaro; Cataldo; Waltenberg, 2022). Assessing and ensuring quality within a diverse system presents significant challenges, particularly because common quantitative indicators, such as pass rates and standardized test performance, may fail to capture the complexity of the educational process (Rothen, 2018; Sousa, 2013). In this context, Freitas (2019) advocates for qualitative evaluation as an approach that values holistic student development and the creation of an inclusive learning environment.

According to Smith and Colby (2010), teaching effectiveness should be measured not only by the content delivered but also by how it is presented and assimilated, encouraging active and meaningful learning. The quality of teacher training, including mastery of new technologies and pedagogical methodologies, is essential to the success of this process (Ferreira; Almeida, 2019). Moreover, student engagement in the educational process is crucial, with methods that stimulate interest and knowledge retention serving as indicators of quality education (Fernandes; Fernandes, 2012).

The concept of socially referenced quality highlights that higher education should be evaluated not only by academic outcomes but also by its societal impact (Oliveira; Silva, 2017). This perspective links education to broader goals, such as social justice and sustainable development, and underscores the need for pedagogical innovations that include active learning and the effective use of educational technology (Oliveira; Ferreira, 2018).

Thus, measuring teaching quality requires balancing quantitative and qualitative indicators (Souza; Lima, 2021). The influence of university rankings on institutional management and educational policies demonstrates how external metrics can shape institutional priorities, often to the detriment of students' real needs and societal demands (Saccaro; Cataldo; Waltenberg, 2022). Contextualization is crucial, as each educational community has unique characteristics that affect teaching quality (Castro; Santos, 2019). This reinforces the importance of an evaluation system such as SINAES (National System for the Evaluation of Higher Education), which aims to be more inclusive and tailored to the diverse realities of the Brazilian educational landscape (Freire et al., 2021).

IV. Higher Education Census In Brazil

The Higher Education Census emerges as an indispensable tool for outlining the reality of Brazilian education, collecting crucial data that support the development of public policies and educational management (Inep, 2022). The objectives of the Census include providing reliable statistics, supporting the formulation of educational policies, and contributing to the quality and accessibility of higher education, reflecting its systematic and strategic relevance to the sector (Hoffmann; Nunes; Muller, 2019; Inep, 2022).

With nationwide coverage, the Higher Education Census is part of SINAES, coordinated by the Directorate of Educational Statistics of Inep, and is conducted annually. It captures a wide range of information, from demographic data to financial resources and research activities of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Inep, 2022). The methodology involves both individualized and batch declarations, adapting to the varied needs of HEIs and ensuring comprehensive and detailed data collection (Inep, 2022).

All public and private HEIs are required to respond to the Census, which includes detailed information on undergraduate and sequential courses, faculty, and students. The accuracy of the data relies on the responsibility of the institution's legal representative and the institutional enumerator, ensuring the reliability of the collected information (Inep, 2022).

Figure 1 – Stages of the Higher Education Census in Brazil by Inep (2020)

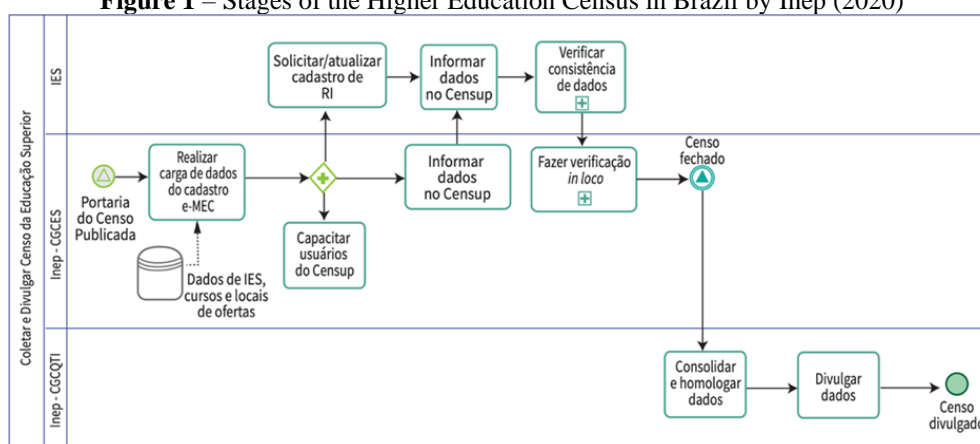


Figure 1 illustrates the stages involved in the Higher Education Census in Brazil, outlining the process from the initial data collection to the final publication of official statistics. Initially, Inep issues an ordinance with the official schedule, which triggers the distribution of instructions to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for compiling the necessary institutional and academic information. The HEIs are then responsible for updating and validating the data through specific modules of the Censup system, covering users, institutions, courses, faculty, and students.

After the completion of the data entry period, Inep verifies the consistency of the data, working with institutional enumerators to make final corrections. Once the data is finalized, it is made available as reports for consultation and validation by HEIs. Following this step, Inep publishes statistical summaries, solidifying the information as official statistics and making them available for public consultation. These data are published on the Inep website, becoming a valuable resource for the academic community, public policy makers, and society (Inep, 2022).

The Census is regulated by a series of decrees and ordinances that establish its guidelines and responsibilities, such as:

- Decree No. 6,425/2008, which defines the procedures for data collection.
- MEC Ordinance No. 21/2017, which regulates the e-MEC system, strengthening the legal structure for data collection (Brasil, 2008; Brasil, 2017).

The Higher Education Census highlights higher education as a key factor for labor market appreciation, demonstrating that professionals with higher education qualifications earn higher salaries than those with only secondary education. This reinforces the importance of inclusive policies and measures to reduce social inequalities (Inep, 2022).

Although Censup provides a large volume of quantitative data, it has limitations regarding the assessment of qualitative aspects, such as student satisfaction and the effectiveness of teaching methodologies. Additionally, delays in updating and publishing the data may hinder the implementation of necessary policies and responses to emerging challenges in the education sector (Inep, 2022).

Inep (2020) presents a timeline of the Census, illustrating how it has evolved from its inception in 1916 to the adoption of technology and recent innovations. This evolution reflects social, political, and technological changes, demonstrating the Census's commitment to accuracy and continuous updates in higher education data.

The data from the Higher Education Census are essential for the formulation of effective educational policies, providing vital information for governments and institutions to plan and implement measures to improve the quality and accessibility of higher education. The participation of HEIs in the Census allows access to a vast database, which is fundamental for understanding the reality of higher education and making informed decisions (Saraiva Educação, 2022).

V. Methodological Framework

The methodological framework for analyzing higher education in Brazil is built on the approaches proposed by authors such as Kruger (2023), Gil (2022), and Marconi and Lakatos (2021). This framework encompasses both quantitative and qualitative methods, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics that characterize the Brazilian educational system. The combination of these methodologies is crucial to capture both the quantitative breadth of the data and the qualitative depth of educational experiences.

The research is situated in Brazil, a nation with significant economic, social, and demographic diversity, which presents unique challenges for the educational sector. As the largest economy in Latin America, Brazil exhibits pronounced regional disparities that directly influence the distribution and quality of higher education. This geographic and demographic context provides a vital setting for exploring the interactions between education and socioeconomic variables, which is essential for understanding the peculiarities of higher education in the country.

The study adopts a mixed-method research approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods for a more holistic analysis of the Brazilian higher education system. This mixed methodology allows for a robust assessment by combining the objectivity of quantitative data with the contextual richness and meanings provided by qualitative research. The interaction between these methods facilitates the identification of patterns while deeply exploring the nuances and critical details of educational phenomena.

The research is classified as explanatory-descriptive, implying an in-depth investigation that seeks not only to describe the aspects of the educational system but also to explain the relationships between the different elements identified. Through this design, the study details and interprets educational variables, from infrastructure to teacher training, analyzing how different factors contribute to the effectiveness of higher education in Brazil.

The study uses secondary data covering all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) participating in the Higher Education Census. The sample includes data from 2,595 institutions, providing an extensive analysis that reflects the diversity and complexity of higher education in the country. This broad database facilitates the generalization of results and the understanding of patterns on a national scale.

The data collection technique is documentary, using a data collection matrix developed from information available on the Inep website. This method ensures the accuracy and relevance of the data used, guaranteeing that the research is based on verifiable and officially recognized information, which is vital for the integrity and credibility of the analysis.

The data were collected directly from the Inep website, referring to the year 2022, the most recent available at the time of the investigation. This process involved a careful selection of relevant information, ensuring that the data used were as up-to-date and comprehensive as possible. This meticulous procedure is essential to ensure that the analysis reflects current conditions and emerging trends in Brazilian higher education.

For data analysis, two primary techniques were employed:

- Content Analysis, as proposed by Bardin (2016), which helps to identify patterns and themes in qualitative data.
- Descriptive Statistics, which provides a clear, quantitative view of trends and variations within the dataset [only mentioned throughout the text due to the length of the article].

The combination of these techniques allows for a multifaceted interpretation of the data, facilitating the extraction of significant insights and a deeper understanding of the underlying complexities within educational data. Content analysis discerns patterns and themes, while descriptive statistics offers a numerical summary of trends and variations, providing a well-rounded perspective on the state of higher education in Brazil.

VI. Results And Discussions

The current scenario of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Brazil highlights the predominance of the private sector, which represents 88% of the 2,595 institutions registered until 2022. Among these, 63% are for-profit and 37% are non-profit, indicating a trend of education commercialization, which may impact the quality and accessibility of higher education (Inep, 2022).

Regarding the faculty profile, federal universities stand out for their highly qualified teaching staff, with most professors holding doctoral degrees. In contrast, private institutions, especially those not focused on research, employ mostly master's degree holders and specialists, reflecting different expectations and realities that influence the quality of teaching (Inep, 2022).

The distance learning (EaD) modality is growing, particularly in the private sector, representing more than 75% of enrollments. This expansion, intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic, is seen both as a response to the need for flexibility and as a massification strategy, which may compromise educational quality (Cury, 2006; Salla, 2009).

The most common EaD programs, such as Pedagogy and Business Administration, suggest a cost-reduction approach, as these programs require less physical infrastructure compared to fields like Medicine and Engineering (Inep, 2022).

The participation of women in higher education has increased but does not necessarily reflect equality of opportunities or outcomes. Women still face barriers in male-dominated fields, such as exact sciences and engineering. Moreover, female underrepresentation in leadership positions highlights the need for effective policies to promote gender equality (Hollas; Bernardi, 2020; Terra; Carraro; Ferreira, 2019).

The Brazilian educational market shows a concentration of enrollments in a few large institutions, suggesting an oligopolistic trend that may limit educational diversity and fail to fully address regional and socioeconomic needs (Inep, 2022).

Concerning expansion policies, the geographical distribution of HEIs shows a higher concentration in the Southeast region, followed by the Northeast, South, Central-West, and North. This distribution may contribute to regional disparities in access to higher education, posing challenges to educational policy efforts to promote a more equitable distribution of resources (Inep, 2022).

The high demand for courses such as Medicine, especially in public institutions, reflects not only the perceived quality but also the high social value attributed to the medical profession. This generates extreme competition, which may exclude low-income students or drive many to pursue education abroad (Inep, 2022).

The historical trend of enrollments from 1980 to 2022 shows continuous growth, particularly in distance learning (EaD) since 2014. This reflects the flexibilization of educational policies and the increasing acceptance of EaD as a valid modality (Inep, 2022).

Programs such as the Student Financing Fund (Fies) and the University for All Program (ProUni) have been fundamental in democratizing access to higher education, providing financial aid and scholarships to low-income students. However, these programs face challenges related to financial sustainability and the quality of education offered by participating institutions (Sampaio, 2011).

Regarding fields of study, most students are concentrated in 'Business, Administration, and Law,' indicating better employment prospects and professional growth. In contrast, in OECD countries, fields such as 'Engineering, Production, and Construction' are more representative, reflecting different economic structures and educational priorities (Inep, 2022).

Furthermore, the profile of teachers in primary and secondary schools in Brazil highlights significant challenges regarding proper training. Many teachers work without the necessary qualifications in the subjects they teach, especially in the North and Northeast regions. This issue, aggravated by uncompetitive salaries, hampers the recruitment and retention of qualified professionals, directly impacting the quality of education in the country's most disadvantaged areas (Inep, 2022).

Continuing education programs are essential for teachers to update their teaching methods and adapt to new educational and technological demands. Such initiatives are fundamental for promoting more effective and inclusive learning, preparing students adequately for higher education and labor market challenges (Terra; Carraro; Ferreira, 2019).

According to Inep (2022), student trajectory indicators show that, despite increased access to higher education, there is a significant dropout rate, particularly among low-income students and those in private institutions. This phenomenon highlights the need for more than just expanding access to higher education; it is essential to invest in academic support and measures that ensure student retention and course completion.

The impact of Fies and ProUni on student trajectories varies significantly across different socioeconomic contexts. While higher-income students use these programs to access more prestigious institutions, lower-income students often face financial and academic challenges that are not fully mitigated by financial aid. This underscores the need for constant adjustments to these programs to ensure they not only

expand access but also effectively contribute to the formation of qualified professionals and meet the demands of the Brazilian labor market (Moura, 2017; Andrade, 2022).

Finally, regional variations in ENEM applications and the concentration of enrollments in a few large institutions reflect inequalities in access to and perceptions of higher education across different regions of Brazil. This requires a more strategic approach in educational policies, seeking ways to promote greater equity in access to higher education and ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their region or socioeconomic status.

Table 1 summarizes the points presented above, translating them into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) regarding higher education in Brazil. This analysis, known as FOFA in Portuguese or SWOT in English (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), is widely used in educational planning.

Table 1 – SWOT Analysis

<p>Weaknesses:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Low average educational attainment in the North and Northeast regions, especially among young Black and low-income populations. 2. Low enrollment rates in higher education, failing to meet the targets of the National Education Plan (PNE). 3. Significant racial and socioeconomic inequalities in access to education. 4. Fewer public HEIs compared to private ones, affecting both the quality and accessibility of higher education. 5. Insufficient funding and racial disparities in student financing programs. 6. Higher dropout rates and low teaching quality in private HEIs, especially in distance learning (EaD). 7. Lower graduation rates among men and low female participation in fields such as Engineering and Technology. 	<p>Strengths:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase in educational attainment and income among young people aged 18 to 29 with higher education. 2. Diverse academic offerings and qualified faculty at public HEIs. 3. Expansion and inclusion in the Federal Network of Higher Education, with affirmative action policies (quota systems). 4. Programs such as Fies and ProUni contributing to the reduction of disparities. 5. Higher retention and graduation rates in public HEIs. 6. Increase in the number of graduates and improvement in teacher training.
<p>Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adopt OECD standards to increase higher education participation among people aged 25 to 34 and older adults. 2. Expand distance learning (EaD) in public HEIs to meet demand at lower costs. 3. Optimize course offerings and seats in public HEIs, focusing on high-demand areas and diversity. 4. Increase the availability of courses in Information Technology (IT) and Engineering. 5. Promote teacher training using EaD as an accessible platform. 6. Improve the geographical distribution of technology courses and teacher training programs within the Federal Education Network. 	<p>Threats:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Commercialization of higher education, with an increase in for-profit private HEIs. 2. Mass production of distance learning (EaD) courses by private HEIs, potentially compromising educational quality. 3. Inequality in access to higher education, with excessive concentration of enrollments in private HEIs. 4. Emigration of Brazilian students to institutions abroad, due to the limited availability of programs such as Medicine. 5. Flexible legislation for private HEIs, contributing to rapid expansion without adequate quality control.

The Brazilian educational system faces significant challenges, particularly in the North and Northeast regions, where the average educational attainment among young people aged 18 to 29 is alarmingly low. An effective strategy to address this problem is to strengthen the educational infrastructure in these areas, with a particular focus on expanding access to Distance Learning (EaD). This approach would overcome geographical barriers and facilitate quality education for students in remote regions. Additionally, scholarship programs and student financing specifically targeted at low-income students and ethnic minorities could help address existing racial and socioeconomic inequalities.

Another critical aspect is the funding of public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Currently, these institutions face resource limitations that negatively affect the quality and expansion of their services. Increasing public HEI funding would enable infrastructure improvements, expansion of in-person and distance learning programs, and a restructuring of course offerings to align with high-demand fields. Additionally, implementing more effective educational marketing strategies could attract a larger number of students.

Inclusion should remain a central force within public HEIs. Strengthening inclusion policies to better reflect the diversity of the Brazilian population is essential. This goal can be achieved through the expansion of affirmative action policies (quota systems) and the development of support programs to assist underrepresented students from admission to graduation. Such measures would help ensure greater equity and diversity within the academic environment.

It is also imperative to improve the regulation of private HEIs, especially those offering distance learning programs, which experience high dropout rates. Implementing stricter standards for student-teacher ratios and faculty qualifications would help maintain educational quality. Additionally, encouraging more high

school students to take the ENEM exam, widely used for university admission, could broaden access to higher education.

The commercialization of higher education poses a significant threat to quality and accessibility. Therefore, it is crucial to rethink programs such as Fies and ProUni, ensuring they continue to serve as effective mechanisms for educational inclusion rather than simply acting as subsidies for private HEIs. Promoting female participation in male-dominated fields such as engineering and technology through awareness campaigns and mentoring programs is also vital to achieving greater gender equality in higher education.

Finally, teacher training must be a priority. Expanding Pedagogy courses and providing accessible teacher training programs, particularly via EaD, could help qualify teachers already in the workforce. Integrating public policies, funding, educational quality, and inclusion is essential for developing a robust and accessible educational system, capable of meeting the needs of all segments of Brazilian society.

VII. Conclusion

Higher education in Brazil faces critical challenges, particularly in the North and Northeast regions, where socioeconomic and racial disparities are reflected in low average educational attainment among young people. Issues such as enrollment rates falling short of National Education Plan (PNE) targets, limited participation of adults and the elderly in higher education, and marked differences between public and private institutions demand immediate attention. Additionally, racial inequality in student financing programs, teaching quality issues, high dropout rates in private distance learning (EaD) institutions, and gender disparities highlight the need for substantial reforms and targeted investments.

On the other hand, Brazilian higher education also shows encouraging signs of progress. Increased average educational attainment and income among young people, diversified and high-quality academic offerings in public institutions, and the contributions of programs like Fies and ProUni in reducing disparities are notable examples of significant advances. The expansion of technological higher education, along with improvements in inclusion, retention, and graduation rates, further underscores the potential for growth and enhancement of the educational system.

There are notable opportunities for innovation and improvement, including alignment with OECD international standards, expansion of distance learning (EaD) in public institutions, and optimization of course offerings and enrollment capacity. Promoting academic diversification, addressing disparities, and enhancing student support and gender equity represent promising areas for strategic actions that could have a positive impact on higher education.

However, Brazilian higher education still faces threats that compromise its sustainability and quality. The commercialization of education, disparities in undergraduate offerings between public and private institutions, and the dominance of EaD programs by private educational conglomerates pose significant challenges. These issues demand critical approaches and deep reforms to ensure a more equitable system.

This investigation contributes both theoretically and practically by providing a deeper understanding of the inequalities and dynamics within the educational system, offering guidelines for public policies and effective educational strategies. However, an important limitation of this study is its generalized approach, which could benefit from more region-specific analyses and additional studies on postgraduate education, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of higher education levels and their interrelations.

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