

Higher Educational Management: Challenges and Perspectives in Small and Medium-Sized Universities in Southern Brazil

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Abstract

In contemporary Brazil, while many social changes are taking place, higher education institutions face difficulties in harmonizing the quality of education with responsible, efficient management and sustainability. This study aimed to analyze the actions of managers for corporate educational governance in private small and medium-sized universities, in the Southern region of Brazil. The investigation is qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory with primary data collected from semi-structured interviews with fifteen owners, executives, and managers of different private universities, analyzed with the content analysis technique. Our results point to educational governance as a management enhancer, as it gives direction, integrates the organization, and ensures institutional value, by monitoring and evaluating results in a sustainable way. Educational governance supports transparency, equity, and corporate responsibility. It is concluded that it is necessary to incorporate educational corporate governance with the inclusion of the principles of educational management and academic innovation together with university social responsibility to facilitate a transformative learning experience in higher education institutions.

Keywords: higher education, higher educational management, educational corporate governance, private universities.

1. Introduction

In Brazil, private higher education institutions (HEIs) represent the vast majority of universities according to the year 2018 census (INEP, 2019). This ratio began to be followed

up as a result of various public policies for the expansion of higher education in the two last decades, resulting in a new scenario for the distribution of Brazilian higher education institutions. Thus, to remain in the market, private educational institutions are encouraged to adopt corporate governance strategies and principles in a much more diligent and dynamic way than just applying the principles enunciated by the traditional higher education administration, which, for many years was just the only management model adopted.

In the current context, this type of management is still very present. Educators, who know educational management, assume positions as course managers, directors, or other administrative positions that end up demanding a much greater dynamic and strategic approach, derived from the competition at the moment, especially directly impacting the results of HEIs.

From a historical perspective, the educational context in Brazil has undergone profound changes over time and, until the present moment, it cannot be considered consolidated and independent. On the contrary, its performance is based on the interests and guidelines of public policies (Drechsel, 2016). However, an interesting aspect to be taken into account is the influence of globalization on the composition of the higher education universe. Thus, for the composition of this article, a discussion of the state of the art was necessary to understand the history, scenarios, and guidelines of national and international bodies and other studies on topics related to higher education, higher educational management, and educational corporate governance, as described in the next pages.

This qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study has as a field of investigation - small and medium-sized - educational institutions in the southern region of Brazil. The qualitative approach has been considered appropriate for this study, as it is necessary to adhere to a comprehensive approach to analyze the experience of universities owners, managers, and other social actors, experiencing the instability of Brazilian higher education, difficulties, and challenges, reflected in the learning results since the economic crisis of 2014.

It is argued here, that by encouraging adherence to corporate governance, it is possible to help these managers to choose the most effective tools for decision-making processes as well as for the formation of new partnerships to understand, what are the most urgent and frequent higher education market demands. International studies are already beginning to focus more intensively on the relationship between corporate governance and educational institutions. However, in Brazil, there are still few studies that address the education and corporate governance relationship, which justifies the proposition of our study (Grings & Vier, 2019). It is also a way of understanding how institutions have reacted to a scenario marked by competitiveness and change.

Brazil started an era of an economic crisis in 2014, that is until today, spreading and affecting important areas of the economy, including areas directly linked to development, such as education. The National Institute of Educational Studies and Research An ío Teixeira point out that from 2016 onwards a significant loss in the total number of college students was accumulated (INEP, 2017). In contrast, between 2014 and 2016, the number of private universities has been increasing. In this context, two important points emerge: the first is the

economic crisis, which drives the decline in the number of students from HEIs, both in student retention and performance; and the second, is the growing number of competitors active in this sector.

Within this context, corporate governance, over the years, has become one of the most discussed topics in the business area and is considered an excellent management tool. However, it is questionable to think of an imposing way to apply it within an educational institution. On the other extreme and going against this global trend, most HEIs in Brazil still choose to put professors whose specialties are restricted to their area of expertise at the head of their management, and most of the time their knowledge is not articulated with a management strategic educational background or with corporate governance techniques aimed at the sustainability of the institution. Even so, it must be considered that the educational institution commits far beyond those that are employed only in the corporate world, since its final service, that is, education, is responsible for shaping society.

In this sense, it is possible to see that the educational sector is becoming more and more professional, and old models of management are no longer able to meet the current needs for the sustainability of Brazilian private education as a business. Therefore, managerial professionalization adds a set of values capable of generating better performances, whether academic, social, or managerial, so this study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1 - How is higher education being conceived in private institutions [small and medium-sized] in the southern region of Brazil?
- 2 - What are the characteristics of higher education management in the context of private institutions [small and medium] in the Southern region of Brazil?
- 3 – How can Corporate Governance principles help HEIs to get better performance in the academic, social, and business arenas?

Thus, this study aims to analyze the actions of managers for corporate educational governance in private small and medium-sized universities, in the Southern region of Brazil.

2. Literature Review

2.1 International Organizations' Educational Guidelines

2.1.1 International Approaches to Educational Management

The quality of education, for UNESCO, is the result of the pressures attributed to the different visions of education, affecting students, their families, the community around them, and the leaders of nations (UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, it is recognized that the process of building knowledge – what is learned - is as important as access to education. The quality of education, the responsibility of its managers, should no longer be understood only through – reading, writing, and arithmetic, which demands adherence to an expanded vision of education at all levels. UNESCO, therefore, understands high-quality education as one that promotes human rights and, for that, it must be based on rights that allow the implementation of all aspects that permeate integral and comprehensive education.

UNESCO emphasizes that three essential aspects allow education as a human right to be offered not only within the scope of higher education. First, it becomes essential that it be understood as an important end, by its very essence; second, it enables the practice of human rights in education; and, finally, education must be a mechanism capable of facilitating access to other rights (UNESCO, 2020). The quality of education, then, must recognize the past, be relevant to the present and look to the future, as well as promote the construction of knowledge capable of solving society's demands. In this perspective, all forms of knowledge are admitted. It is also understood that high-quality education reflects the dynamics of a country's culture.

Education, therefore, must be able to promote a sustainable future and managers need to have this understanding. The International Labor Organization also discusses the management of the quality of education (OIT, 2020). It is known that some factors prevent the achievement of quality education and its adequate management. They are linked to contemporary phenomena, such as the premature aging of the population, the disproportionate distribution of the number of young people by country; the quality of professional training and youth education; and the high speed at which digital technologies are developed and become part of everyday life. Such phenomena make people live in a scenario marked by unpredictable changes, such as inconsistent employment.

The Organization of American States, in turn, points out that higher education institutions have developed strategies that have boosted the access of the workforce to education (OEA, 2018). In this sense, it defended the promotion of the possibilities that allow the entrance and maintenance of the student to have a quality education. Higher education institutions must also understand that many students have to balance education with a dedication to family and work. Management, then, must take into account different models and teaching formats, such as online and hybrid.

2.1.2 International Overview of Corporate Governance and Its Relationship With Education

Global corporate governance and its relationship with education have become increasingly competitive, due to capitalism. As far as UNESCO is concerned, without the necessary resources, its voice has been increasingly muffled in a scenario that becomes increasingly expanded, since access to education has made this market fiercely competitive (UNESCO, 2020). UNESCO understands that scientific knowledge is the most powerful source capable of making the sustainable development goals (SDGs) provided for in the 2030 Agenda achieved, mainly because there will be a greater awareness of their social contribution. In this sense, several ways have been proposed for scientific research to contribute to the formation of policies that can focus on the urgent demands and needs of global education.

The International Labor Organization also plays an important role in consolidating good corporate governance practices in higher education (OIT, 2020). Therefore, governance is a way of generalizing and reorienting the skills and competencies, as well as the political horizons of the people involved with management. It can be mentioned that the new patterns of global order are intrinsically related to changes in global life. Over the last few years, governance practices have been strengthened, so that they are no longer restricted to national

governments, but can cover multiple levels. Participants are no longer just traditional governments and international organizations, so non-governmental organizations and other non-state actors become involved in the process.

In this sense, the International Labor Organization is concerned with the arrangement of such agents in the governance of an entity, so that, in addition to paying attention to the permanent promotion of international labor standards, as well as encouraging the best conditions of work and the expansion of social protection with policies aimed at promoting decent work in the most diverse areas. In the field of education, the promotion of equal opportunities and equal treatment for all people is a requirement that all governance needs to adhere to so that all members of the entity must commit to the same objectives so that they become real.

Moreover, the visions and arrangements of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have fostered the creation of a more dynamic and coherent way with the demands of contemporary society within any organization (OCDE, 2021). It is from these visions and arrangements that the organization has produced artifacts and strategies. The OECD has a well-defined agenda for higher education, and, for that, it starts from the perspective of organizational cultures, providing subsidies so that knowledge can be created and updated whenever necessary in such entities, respecting the SDGs. It works directly with the cultural dimension of every organization so that all management processes may go through these OECD opinions, visions, and recommendations.

2.1.3 Guidelines From National Institutions

Following, are some about the laws, concepts, and panorama of higher education, higher educational management, and corporate governance in Brazil.

2.1.3.1 Brazilian Law on Educational Management

The most important Brazilian law in force, the Federal Constitution of 1988, defends democratic management as one of the pillars of education in Brazil (BRASIL, 1988). The Brazilian constitution was later regulated by complementary laws such as the Law of Education Foundations of 1996, and the 2014-2024 National Education Plan, in its Goal 19.

The law of education foundations (LEF) points to a decentralized, more participatory leadership, not restricted to teachers who have some experience in the coordination or direction of educational institutions. Therefore, LEF regulates the democratic management of the school, establishing guidelines for the organization of the physical space, the pedagogical work and the participation of school actors, and the integration between the school and the community (BRASIL, 1996). Under article 56°, it is determined to public HEIs “will obey the principle of democratic management, ensuring the existence of deliberative collegiate councils, in which the institutional, local and regional community will participate”. It is the role of public authorities to impose political-administrative measures in their interest as well as to ensure that laws and decrees are approved. On November 24, 1995, Law N°9.131 was approved, ruling the National Education Council, and on December 21 of the same year, Law N°9.192 which discusses the choice of directors to manage HEIs (BRASIL, 1995a, 1995b).

The 2014-2024 National Education Plan reaffirms the constitutional commitment to the fundamentals of teacher training and appreciation of the teaching profession, defending this democratic leadership. The financing and management pillars control the implementation of Education Councils, from a systems perspective, as school councils are duly represented throughout the educational community (BRASIL, 2014).

The National Education Conference is a meeting whose fruits were harvested for the National Education Plan, the constitutional foundations of democratic and participatory management are translated again, taking it as a deliberately collective space that achieves an education of social and works for the production of a society founded on social justice, democracy, and equality; and as an essential element for improving the quality of education (BRASIL, 2014).

It is important to point out that Goal 19° of the National Education Plan deals with eight guidelines related to democratic management: constitution, formation, and maintenance of collegiate councils, forums, and unions; participation of families and education professionals; social control and inspection of public resources and choice of directors, based on merit, performance, and public consultation. Regarding the process of administration in education, the 2014-2024 National Education Plan guides democratic education as a foundation in its Goal number 7.

2.1.3.2 Brazilian Corporate Governance Overview

This subject, in Brazil, is still in construction. The Brazilian Institute of Corporate Governance gives guidelines, since 1999, based on the principles of transparency, equity, accountability, and corporate responsibility. For the institute, Corporate Governance began its incorporation through privatizations and the opening of the national market in the early 1990s, which led to the creation of the Brazilian Institute of Members of Boards of Management, leading to the creation of the first Code of Best Corporate Governance Practices, aiming to guide the best transparent, equitable and responsible practices in organizations (IBGC, 2009).

In the year 2000, the São Paulo Stock Exchange (BOVESPA), decided to organize corporate governance levels for organizations that were traded on the stock exchange. Given this, the assumptions were oriented towards the development of the capital market in Brazil, thus emerging levels that contemplated a greater requirement for the so-called "good corporate governance practices". To this end, three classes were created: Level 1, Level 2, and New Market. More recently, two classifications were added to the previous three: Bovespa+ and Bovespa+ Level II, totaling five categories. It is according to the class that obligations relevant to Brazilian legislation are added (B3, 2021).

Another institution, the OECD, contributes by supporting countries with good governance, reforming and enhancing their economic policy in favor of better development. It is considered a necessary international vanguard to foster equity and growth, composed of expert committees that print quality in the tasks of its Secretariat, with its effective methods of data collection and analysis, having peer review in addition to recommendations for the authorities through evidence, collaborating to improve policies and instructing good governance practices (OCDE, 2004).

When referring to Governance, sustainability is highlighted, however, it brings a new look that meets what we can see in the Sustainable Development Goals (ONU, 2015), in which the term sustainable development entered the international agenda with the Brundtland Report, named “Our common future”, in 1987. Thus, years later, sustainability, in addition to its environmental idea, also aggregates the social and the economic so that there is social justice, an inclusive economy, and a responsible environment.

2.2 Related Studies on Governance in Education

2.2.1 Main International Studies on Governance in Education

As this study proposes to discuss the management of private HEIs in Brazil and their sustainability, it is important to explore international studies on corporate governance. However, the first difficulty encountered was the context of developed countries concerning higher education, since most of them have a different teaching format and autonomy guidelines, making it difficult to relate with the Brazilian reality.

Nevertheless, we started with an international search for the expression “corporate governance in universities”, evidencing that the topic is still scarcely explored. There is significant exposure to the topic only in corporate governance and it is closely associated with enterprises. What was observed, therefore, is that studies on this type of governance in universities are associated with institutions related to the public government, associating the principles of governance to the public sphere. From this search, materials were collected in English and Spanish that discuss the topic of corporate governance associated with the context of universities.

The first identified study, written by King-Dom ínguez et al. (2019) analyzes the evolution of research in corporate governance at universities, making a comparison with those carried out in the field of corporate governance in general. To accomplish this, the study compiled and analyzed a database of 265 articles published in Web of Science indexed journals from the period 1957 to 2017. For this purpose, bibliometric, descriptive techniques, and analysis of co-occurrence of keywords and bibliographic references were applied. The results made it possible to verify a positive evolution in the number of articles, journals, and authors publishing on university corporate governance, especially in the years 2012 to 2017. However, there was low specialization in the treatment of the subject, measured through organizations or authors. Evidence of this is that 19% of organizations that investigate university corporate governance assume this theme as permanent: this stands out in the Hong Kong Institute with six articles. In the case of authors, out of a universe of 443, only 34 (less than 10 percent) wrote more than one article on the subject.

The second study found, published by Sabandar et al. (2018), discussed the implementation of good corporate governance in five universities of Makassar associated with the quality of education through field investigation, using interview techniques, observation, documentation, and a questionnaire applied to 200 respondents. The paper concludes that, in general, the correct implementation of good governance can significantly affect the quality of education but emphasizes that the universities of Makassar still need to improve the transparency

requirement.

The third study, authored by Crous (2017), studied four universities in Africa and considered that due to the lack of efficient administration and governance when emphasizing financial results, mainly associated with corruption problems, these problems raise concerns, as universities are largely financed by state subsidies. Qualitative research was used, based on the guidelines of the Reporting Regulation (which contains the principles of the King III Report), on international best practices and the King IV Report for the years 2011 to 2015 of these Universities. A total of 113 annual reports were analyzed concerning the university structure. The study findings suggest the absence of detailed disclosure, which leads to concerns about disclosure practices at these universities, as well as universities' commitment to transparency and accountability. In this study, it was concluded that the application of corporate governance principles emerges as an alert system to indicate deficiencies in the corporate governance practices of universities.

The fourth study, published by Bernasconi and Rodríguez-Ponce (2018) discussed the mission of a university in terms of its objectives of creating, transforming, and propagating new knowledge for society. In addition, the text analyzes the importance of a process of integration and dissemination of knowledge with the councils that represent the director - such as the board of directors - and with the university community - the academic council - to reach the best decisions and the best acceptance for their future implementation. It concludes, therefore, that a critical element for universities to successfully fulfill their functions is the quality of their corporate governance.

The fifth article, authored by Celis (2011), aimed to identify the problem of the government of public universities and propose the principles of good corporate governance as the solution for the administrative and academic effectiveness of these universities. Within the context of this study, the main problem was associated with discovering how the principles of good corporate governance can facilitate proper administration, recognition of rights, the definition of responsibilities, the flow of information, and the establishment of relationships with parties interested in national universities. The conclusions of this study were carried out with the support of qualitative research treated through a descriptive and inductive method.

The sixth study, published by Abondado et al. (2012), presents a diagnosis of the different forms of government used by educational institutions in Colombia, analyzing the dynamics of interaction and conflicts that arise between different interest groups and government bodies and uses this assessment as a starting point that encourages the reflection of Colombian university executives and the government to establish public policy actions aimed at guaranteeing appropriate academic governance structures. This was a pilot, descriptive and exploratory study, financed by the Ministry of Education, as part of a strategic project to strengthen the research and innovation capacity of educational institutions. The description made and the results presented constitute a starting point for a research agenda on the exercise of government in Institutions.

The seventh and final study, authored by Méndez-Beltrán and Rivera-Rodríguez (2015), dealt with the effect generated by the dissemination of corporate governance practices on the

positioning of organizations. In this study, an analysis of twenty Latin American HEIs was carried out, according to their QS ranking positions. The methodology used was descriptive and simple correlational. Thus, the importance of supporting good governance codes was observed, hoping that governmental systems are outlined and that elements related to the disclosure of information are provided, assuming that the organization, being more transparent, would guarantee economic stability as a whole. At first, it seemed that the recognition of HEIs, measured through the QS ranking, would be directly proportional to the process of disclosing corporate governance policies. However, this was not confirmed nor relevant to solving the operational performance problems. The study also suggests that institutions can become successful without needing to disclose their corporate governance policies.

As it was possible to observe, international studies are already beginning to address corporate governance within educational institutions and the need for these organizations to adapt within their context of educational principles. However, none of the mentioned studies addresses this issue within the proposal being raised in our study, thus corroborating the need for the development of this work to meet the reality in which private HEIs are immersed, especially those that are in Brazil.

2.2.2 Main Brazilian Studies on Governance in Education

Following the same line of research for national studies on the relationship between corporate governance and universities, the research carried out within the Brazilian databases provided 8 materials. The first one, published by Vilela et al. (2015), aimed to verify to what extent the corporate governance model, as developed in some key works in the area, could be considered as a path for improving management, as well as the quality of education in HEIs. To this end, it started with the study of corporate governance principles found in the code of best corporate governance practices of the Brazilian Institute of Corporate Governance. This study found that the principles of corporate governance are really the bases of a model of corporate governance and therefore, it would be valid to apply such principles to organizations in general and, particularly, in the area of education, mainly because of the focus of such a system is precisely the gains with quality.

The second study published by Vilela and Veloso (2014), showed that one of the key issues for good management in higher education institutions is to have a professionalization capable of leading the organization to success, thus ensuring its sustainability in front of society. Within this scope, it is considered that corporate governance proposes an efficient use of resources, as well as the use of transparency and accountability mechanisms. The benefits brought to companies and to public universities that have adopted the corporate governance system validate its use in any type of organization, as there are returns both in financial management processes and transparency as well as better organization of resources to invest in learning quality.

The third study, by Silva et al. (2015), describes that Brazil has undergone through a process of expansion in recent decades and the private sector has absorbed a large part of this contingent, through the expansion of the offer of HEIs and with state incentives. This context

generated fierce competition between universities, mainly from the private sector, demanding strategic management, involving different audiences, and effectively guaranteeing their survival and the excellence of teaching. Therefore, corporate governance could be a possibility that needs adaptations, as it was not designed for this type of organization. Thus, this article identified the assumptions for a corporate governance model for private universities. Data collection was based on bibliographic research considering the topics: private educational institutions, corporate governance, and corporate governance models. This qualitative research, characterized as exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory, recognized the assumptions of Corporate Governance, to transform them into management tools seeking their legitimacy, competitiveness, and teaching excellence. However, the authors conclude that it is necessary to expand research related to corporate governance in universities to improve academic administration systems and promote growth and sustainability.

The fourth study, authored by Vieira and Silva (2016), points out that the adoption of new organizational models is important for any type of institution. In the case of public universities, corporate governance may become an alternative to monitor and supervise 1. the actions of managers concerning compliance with current legislation, 2. the good use of public resources, and 3. the needs of the community for being accountable for that society. The study was exploratory, through bibliographic research carried out in the database of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education, in journals in the area of Administration, Accounting, and Tourism between 2005 and 2015, on the corporate governance applied to the context of federal universities. This search identified 26 articles dealing with corporate governance in the public sector, and institutional development plans in federal universities, and of these, only 03 (three) articles dealt specifically with the adoption of corporate governance in federal universities. In this study, the conclusion was that the theme, although innovative for educational institutions, is still scarcely explored.

The fifth research, carried out by Mello and Silva (2018), states that corporate governance has been standing out in the business scenario in recent decades, also gaining space with HEIs, which, in addition to facing challenges in the educational field, also need to adapt the management of to improve its processes and strategies. Because of this, the study sought to find out which corporate governance practices are used in a community higher education foundation, in the light of the best practices defined by the Brazilian Corporate Governance Institute. For that, descriptive research was used, with a qualitative, case study and documental approaches, in a university foundation located in the south of Brazil. The results of Mello and Silva (2018), showed that the entity adopts a large number of the corporate governance practices, adapting some of them to meet the specificities of the institution, but does not follow specific and primordial recommendations, especially concerning the categories of the fiscal and superior collegiate councils.

The sixth study, carried out by Abjaud (2012), showed that the quality of teaching in undergraduate courses at Brazilian HEIs has been the subject of discussions due to the high number of entities created in recent years offering a variety of courses. The quality levels of these institutions are also a concern of the administration of the organizations and the

government. Corporate governance practices seek to generate value, create wealth, and maximize the return on the organization's investments, corporate strategies, and guidelines for business and operational issues. According to Abjaud (2012), the monitoring of the organization's results is also a premise of corporate governance, which implies adjusting the means so that this quality is guaranteed. Therefore, this study also started from the premise of analyzing the influence of corporate governance practices on the performance of higher education courses, through a case study carried out in a higher education institution in the city of Belo Horizonte.

As observed, studies on the application of corporate governance in the educational context of higher education are still incipient, since, in Brazil, the introduction of corporate governance concepts is still innovative, consequently, our study has an even more complex and challenging objective when focusing in small and medium-sized universities.

3. Method

Our study is qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory with semi-structured interviews carried out with 15 participants. Data collection, performed in the second semester of the year 2021, considered the variables gender, and work experience (≥ 20 years) of managers of small and medium-sized private HEIs - executives, owners, directors, and managers -, operating in the Southern region of Brazil. A semi-structured script was prepared, and pre-tested with questions close to the subjects' daily reality, with the following thematic axes: higher education in Brazil, educational administration, and educational corporate governance. Data from the interviews were transcribed in full and the textual corpus was analyzed using the thematic-category content analysis technique (Bardin, 2016). Data were processed and analyzed with the help of QSR NVivo software.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1 Higher Education in Southern Brazil

HEIs in Brazil are facing a market that, even suffering from the economic crisis since 2014, shows fierce competition in search of new students, to balance their economy and quality because of the price war. Other aggravating factors are the drop in the number of students in traditional (face-to-face) education and the growing number of students enrolling in distance education (INEP, 2017).

In times when competition becomes an enemy, allied to the COVID 19 pandemic, it is important to equate costs, provide new course offerings and innovate, especially with technology, with a focus on student success, and that happens, according to Piazzini and Verdolin (2020), when the student acquires self-knowledge of his/her potential, as well as the independence to self-manage, being able to make choices for career, wanting to remain in the institution until graduation.

Since 1996, with the regulation of the education law, there has been intense demand for the reform of higher education in Brazil, which for Costa et al. (2021) demonstrates the correlation between the State and civil society, within a context of neoliberal articulations in

line with the guidelines and pacts made with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Also, in Brazil, it is possible to identify a process of internationalization as a way to emphasize socio-inclusive issues by HEIs. Therefore, according to Franklin et al. (2018), while in the world some guidelines and policies want to reduce the economic tone, Brazilian education would need to consider education as a strategy of social development.

Following, are the 20 most frequent words in the category of Higher Education in the South of Brazil, in a total of 257 words, counting the similar ones, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Twenty most frequent words in the category higher education in Southern Brazil.

Source: Research data

Similarly, the lexicographic corpus analysis of this category identified three properties: the Brazilian educational market: expansion and challenges; educational quality and competition between institutions, and education versus social development. Related dimensions are shown in Figure 2.

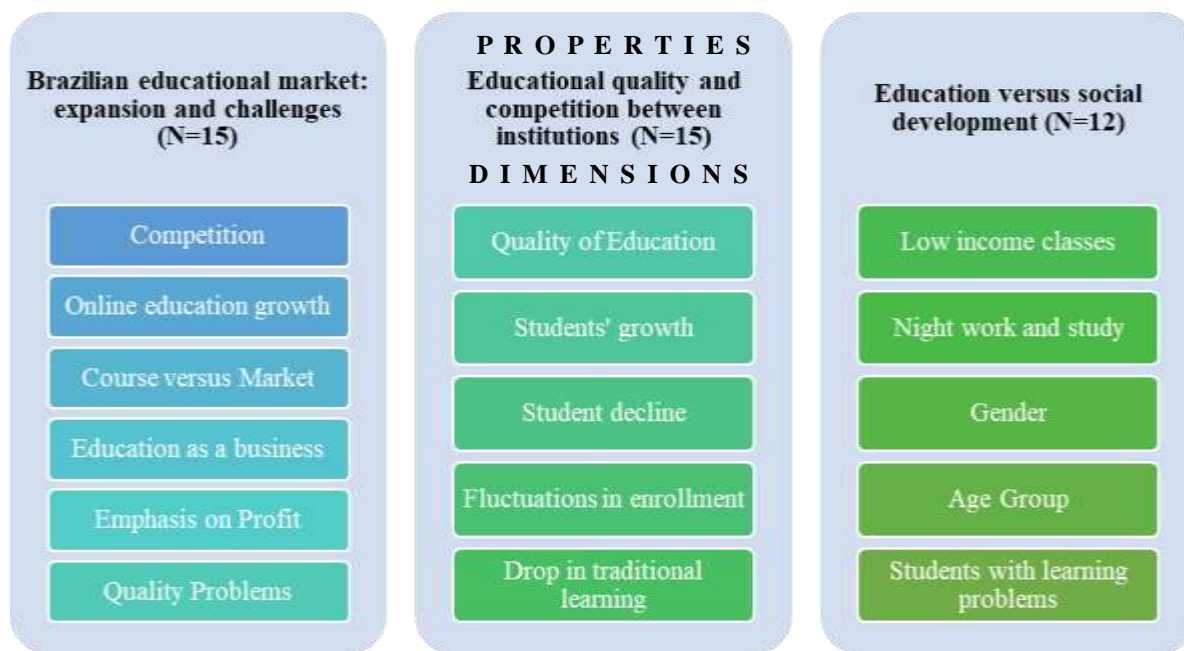


Figure 2. Properties and dimensions of category higher education in Southern Brazil.

Legend: N = number of interviewees pointing to this property

Following the analysis of the semi-structured interviews. The first interviewee alludes that most Brazilian Universities have a common function: to move the economy of cities as well as to establish a new cultural order, thus corroborating the affirmations by (Piletti, 2003) and (Durham, 2003). The respondent emphasizes that, to the detriment of such responsibility, private companies began, in the contemporary corporate world, to pay greater attention to academic training attentive to the job market. Finally, in his report, he elucidates that the relations between the university and the job market must be closer so that students are more apt to work in these spaces.

Respondent 2, in turn, reiterates in her report that she lacks autonomy, as it is not effective in practical terms. The autonomy mentioned by the interviewee is associated with the fact that the Ministry of Education does not directly provide a curricular matrix, and it ends up demanding unspecific content in the National Higher Education Performance Examination. This characteristic turns out to be a vicious circle that hinders any aspects of implementing effectiveness and innovation in higher education (Couto, 2018; Gramani, 2008; Rossetto, 2009). Such impositions not only affect the performance of the institution in terms of the market but also make governance less flexible.

All this combined with the drop in the number of enrollments, especially in small and medium-sized institutions according to the ministry of education data (INEP, 2017), since 2015 the number of new entrants decreased compared to 2014, due to the economic crisis and changes in the policy of the Higher Education Student Financing Fund, which restricted access to new contracts. In this way, it is demonstrated once again how influential private education is in terms of enrollment credit. For Gomes et al. (2018), it is possible to say that the restrictions of the FIES program in 2015 were aimed at promoting adjustments, since in 2014 the excess of liberality caused imbalances in this program.

Even so, these institutions are committed to bringing, to the market, solutions that can be effective in the most diverse areas of knowledge. However, for this reality to be viable, improvements and improvements in the courses and in the management itself are urgent, however, in practice, what happens is a movement that goes in the opposite direction, which discourages managers and impels them to look for alternatives to rebuild management and rescue quality.

Most of these HEIs are centered on undergraduate courses, that took shape from pedagogical projects that were built together with an essentially mechanical society shaped by industry. This view no longer makes sense in the current world we live in. This trend has direct repercussions on the curricular guidelines that support the country's courses. For Andrade and Quel (2018), the lack of correlation between the market and academic means, with the competition between academic performance and results, is what can trigger the sustainability of finances and the solidification of the institution, which can lead to a gap between the administration's bias towards the quality of education and the attributes of efficiency and effectiveness in decision-making and institutional strategic planning.

Quality, for Silveira (2015) is usually linked to meeting the needs of the corporate context, however, in practice, the approximation between the two spheres, education, and work, is still very timid, thus emphasizing the allusions made earlier regarding the search for socioeconomic development, using higher education as a strategy.

Still, about higher education, we found that managers with experience between 20 and 25 years give greater emphasis to competitiveness in higher education and less relevance to the academic profile, as well as managers >30 years old. Likewise, when this is considered from the perspective of small-sized HEI managers, items such as growth/decline and competitiveness become more evident when compared to the academic profile. On the other hand, from the medium-sized HEIs managers' point of view, the growth or decline of these universities is inferior to the others, since they can maintain their students, with possible growth projections, depending on the strategic management and innovative paths.

4.2 The Brazilian Educational Market: Expansion and Challenges

The historical evolution of higher education in which it was possible to observe constant and profound changes, especially after the 2000s, when the partnership between public and private companies intensified and the participation of new education players in the market grew, transforming higher education into a profitable and competitive market.

This competition, in recent times, has been encouraged in Brazilian higher education by the creation of University Centers and Universities, which can quickly approve new courses, as explained by Gomes et al. (2018), as they depend only on their internal councils and not on the approval of the education ministry, - unlike the faculties - with the increase of more forms of access, which go beyond the normal entrance exam.

Due to becoming an increasingly competitive market, HEIs are competing with each other and those that better meet the demands demanded by society get more followers. In this aspect, it is noted that private companies have sought to adapt to market demand. However,

Cruz (2018) recognizes the challenges that these organizations face to adapt to this model.

As much as an institution insists on affirming that it does not enter into a price war and that it fights to maintain quality, the concern with the entry of large economic groups into the sector is highlighted, which, overwhelmingly, creates large commercial campaigns to attract students, they lower prices and treat education, many times, as a product.

It is worthy to note, that this scenario of competitiveness is a phenomenon that occurs in most developing countries, as already mentioned by Durham (2003), following market dynamics, where these large companies or economic conglomerates end up directing a sector.

The substantial growth of distance education is another phenomenon that leads to competition in the current market, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic in which students were getting used to studying at home. The fact is that excessive cost optimization can harm the quality of this modality, as there is a lack of resources to invest in technologies, more modern virtual learning environments, and better-qualified teachers, and they have suffered a lot from this because the courses offered in this modality tend to have a lower monthly fee. So, a balance is needed. For Silva (2019), this fierce competition between private higher education institutions proposes the urgent need to accentuate administrative functions to generate quality for the institution, with an emphasis on strategic management.

It is valid to note that most current HEIs aim to promote a major change in the economic sector, starting with some municipalities, however, attention is drawn to the fact that private institutions focus too much on training “for the market”, which opens a concern of students not being prepared for the social world needs.

There are many challenges encountered in this competitive scenario that is set in the Brazilian educational market and, considering that Faculties, in Brazil, have their autonomy highly restricted compared to University Centers and Universities, it becomes increasingly difficult and complex to find the necessary balance, according to Nascimento (2018) for a healthy administration and the quality of learning, making the great differential to meet the market, technological and bureaucratic demand at the same time.

4.3 Educational Quality and Competition Between Institutions

Something that the manager cannot give up is the quality of education, especially in small and medium-sized institutions that have the strength of the brand of their still regionalized ones, not reaching many large cities. It is this quality that builds the loyalty of potential students and the reference that it articulates with the community.

According to Araújo (2017), about quality of education, we can mention two premises: the evaluation of the HEI graduates through their performance and success in the job market and also the traditional higher education evaluations, external evaluations of the education authorities, through objective indicators present at the end of semesters, years and at the end of the course as well as the average time for completion of training.

Still, along the same lines, interviewee 3 argues that, currently, there is a certain trivialization of teaching in HEIs: *“I see up close a disqualified education, a trivialized education,*

something completely ungoverned, uncontrolled, and that saddens me a lot.” Interviewee 3 points out that this has been one of his biggest concerns, especially when it comes to distance education. He reiterates that the theory is very interesting, but, in practice, there is still a lot to be done, as education, in general, has lost its quality, which is in line with the report of the second respondent. For him, to alleviate this problem, it is important to work in HEIs in a way that is linked to what society, as well as companies, think so that, together, they can provide solutions and improvements.

There are also institutions with permanent enrollment fluctuations. Respondent 4 highlights that, in his HEI, currently, the number of new entrants has been decreasing every year. Also, respondent 2, when questioned, states that although with difficulties, his HEI has been trying to maintain the number of students. He alludes that, currently, they have five thousand students, and manage to maintain the average by compensating with distance learning enrollments.

Another determining factor is the abrupt decrease in the number of students in face-to-face teaching, as perceived by Interviewee 5: *“We are very concerned about the market, the data is exposed there, there is a very large drop, especially in the offer of face-to-face education”*. He alludes that the institution did not grow in general and even had this fall. Thus, he points out that there is a certain concern with being an attractive company in the market to attract more followers.

To deal with this face-to-face issue, interviewee 6 states that her concern to make the HEI more attractive to consumers is based on a primary objective: to guarantee the quality of the service offered to those who seek it:

“It grew little because we were innovating, bringing alternative solutions, implementing new courses because the market is really very difficult and we also started distance education, but with a very different proposal from these franchise packages. So, we have a proposal more focused on our region, talking to what the region needs and with that, we managed to gain a little more evidence and growth”.

In this dynamic, we can understand how face-to-face teaching has been taking lower proportions when compared to distance learning. This movement somewhat minimizes financial cash flows, which were anticipated and requested the Ministry of Education to demand courses in the distance learning modality, especially those that are known as “regional strength”, as they already have a known history with the community in the region where they are installed, seeking to find a balance between the exit of graduates from the face-to-face modality and the entry of freshmen into the distance learning modality.

Therefore, it can be evidenced from the interviewees' discourse a concern with the Brazilian educational quality, since the consolidating groups of higher education use the low price of tuition to compete in the sector, which compromises the resources for investments in more technologies, better teacher compensation, and teacher training.

4.4 Education Versus Social Development

Knowing the profile of students is important to establish some relationships regarding the way they commit to the HEI, whether due to their economic condition, social class, gender, age group, and even level of learning. All this needs to be considered to carry out predictive analysis of these students, focusing on the strategies of permanence of these academics, avoiding evasion, which today has high rates in Brazil.

Regarding the significant number of students who are dropping out of school, Silveira (2015) clarifies that to obtain good results with corporate governance, it is important to be careful with the characteristics of the public of the company in question, as this will establish sustainable strategies, both in the context of maintaining the institution and in offering services and/or products that will make a difference to those who seek the institutions.

Most of the interviewees emphasized that their students come from less favored social classes, as stated by interviewee 6 *“the social class, I would say that they earn from one minimum wage to two minimum wages, within these values, are from the C and D classes and many lost their jobs in the pandemic”*. This is important to consider, because the institution, being a private company, needing to support itself and still make a profit, deals with a student profile that needs to make choices at the end of the month in their family structure, reconciling primary expenses with the study, also necessary for their better performance in the job market.

The search for night teaching is also frequent since the students and almost all of them are employed. Respondent 2, in her report, emphasizes that 99.9 percent of her students work during the day, leaving the night shift so that they can seek education: *“our courses are predominantly at night, so we have customers in a classification of socioeconomic level C and D”*. Once again, the social class is reinforced, as this student is a worker, salaried and many of these institutions need larger spaces to meet this night demand, causing the building infrastructure to be practically empty in the morning and afternoon periods.

Here, there is an opportunity for sponsors to offer differentiated courses in these periods, with price optimization in monthly fees, which could attract new academics.

Today, therefore, the vast majority of students, according to Schenatz et al. (2019), present some financial difficulty to remain in private higher education, as they need to work to pay their tuition and also need institutional incentives so that they are perceived with the reception and fully integrated into the university space.

Therefore, looking at the academic profile becomes essential to work on projects capable of making the student engaged with the University, having the desire to remain, and, mainly, finding meaning in the act of studying, since the student has many challenges outside the University that need to be faced daily, considering their socioeconomic reality and the lack of prospects among millions of unemployed and the social setback that Brazil is experiencing.

5. Final Considerations

In this study, it was possible to observe that most of the higher education institutions in

southern Brazil are small and medium-sized institutions, many of which are family-owned and that are threatened with their sustainability due to the economic crisis that has been taking place in Brazil since 2014, as well as the entry of large competing economic groups that are beginning to invest and manage large universities, which is already compromising the quality of learning according to the indicators of the Ministry of Education.

Thus, in addition to the predominance of the educational management style of the middle of the last century, they also face some difficulties in the administration of these private institutions, such as centralization of power, decision-making without strategic data, and overload of functions and lack of adherence to processes. that take into account the principle of efficiency.

However, it is noted that most respondents are already aware of the need for a new management model, based on corporate governance principles, even if, in practice, they are unaware of the true principles. The interviewees pointed out that this factor would be the “professionalization of educational management”, a look at the institution more in a corporate than educational way.

The main challenge found here is precisely adaptation and anticipation about these transformations, which are continuous and daily. In particular, the Covid-19 Pandemic has mobilized profound changes in the way of learning, and this extends to the way of managing education. These changes appear in the form of demands. Due to this, the market, naturally dynamic and competitive, requires a change of posture, which makes corporate governance an indispensable tool, as it helps to achieve this anticipation.

Innovation is a keyword that appears in the speeches of the most diverse respondents and, thus, points to the need to adopt models that are capable of providing adaptation to the market scenario. Quality added to innovation are mechanisms sought, as well as being attentive to new challenges and opportunities that can create a new space for the formation of students to make them able to act and contribute to the chosen market.

It is worthy to note in this study, that the interview technique was productive to answer the research problem because it was proven that it is a scenario marked by productivity and change, which makes Brazilian institutions are in a constant and daily state of transformation, however, in this process, they end up losing some of their quality, as there is almost no investment in innovation in small and medium-sized private institutions, due to competition and the commercialism that education has become.

Given this, we built some conclusions of the study: Higher education does not need to be a mere reproducer of knowledge and information already socially established, it needs to treat the academic as a protagonist agent in the construction of new knowledge and have in its institutional purpose work for a quality, inclusive education and prepare for this new world that is in disruption.

The search for autonomy is one of the main challenges faced, because, even today, HEIs are located in an ambiguous space that, finding it difficult to deal with the competitiveness of the market (since they are selling to education, in the case of private ones), as well as with the

market demands, which affects their survival and also the employability of their students.

It was also noticeable that the students' training is compromised, since, at the end of their training, they do not have the skills and competencies essential to quality professional performance and, for this reason, they face serious difficulties to survive in this market, in the area of chosen performance. Moreover, our study found that, for these gaps to be addressed, it is essential that student training is more valued and, for that, the strengthening of ties with the market, companies and the like is of paramount importance for including help them transform. Investing in these new strategies and also establishing partnerships with governmental and non-governmental bodies can be very productive.

Furthermore, the delivery of quality and learning experience are the necessary adjustments to the current requirements of the target audience, that is, outdated pedagogical models need to be overcome in the classroom, whether in person or virtual. It is necessary to transpose passive methodologies to active learning methodologies, with a faculty aligned and challenged to learn. It is necessary to leave the focus of teaching and reorient on socially contextualized and entrepreneurial learning, combined with academic innovation.

All this, therefore, needs to be designed for the institution's purpose, as it is the real certainty as to the motive, purpose, and perpetuity of the business. It is necessary to promote the coherence of the vision of the future with the institutional actions of the present. It is also necessary to clarify the reason for the creation of the institution, and the educational pillars (mission, vision, values). Every employee needs to wake up and know what motivates him to work in that place. There are institutions in Brazil, for example, that do not hide the fact that they focus on profit only and there are still others that carry out educational management with a careful and sensitive look at the human being, although, of course, we are talking about all for-profit institutions. and that its partners need to be compensated to continue reinvesting.

Due to such a strategic character, the purpose is the soul of the organization. It is materialized as it connects to the company's ideals as well as from the moment an organizational culture is created. Therefore, organizations must have a clear, objective, and shared purpose. For this, it is necessary to get rid of the idea that it is necessary to show/deliver services to students. Thus, values need to be linked to a cause, as well as have a positive impact on society. In this context, purpose needs to always connect to something greater. It is much more than a mere description of the business; this task is performed by the institutional mission. Therefore, the purpose directs the organization to invest time, energy, and resources efficiently.

All the institution's professionals need to know that education must be understood as a fundamental human right and, therefore, it is essential for all other human rights to be exercised. It is education that promotes individual freedom and contributes to human "empowerment" as well as human development and well-being. It also ensures that humans understand and claim their rights throughout life.

In this context, it is impossible to think about the proposal of an educational institution without it knowing, in-depth, its raw material, that is, it is necessary that learning is placed as an indispensable and protagonist mechanism so that the student can be transformed in all its

essence as well as the environment in which it lives and the global world.

It is concluded, therefore, that when talking about management, policies, and delivery of educational services with quality, it is necessary to have systemic management with strategic planning defining where you want to go; and, for that, there are strategic objectives that aim to give direction, focus, and consistency to institutional actions, establishing medium and long-term intentions. For the success of strategic planning, then, it is essential to perform a direction by objectives, as well as the production, from them, of measurable indicators and goals, preferably with agile project methodologies due to the dynamics that the market imposes.

Governance in education cannot be successful when looking only at a company in a market context, nor can it use the same obsolete tools from the middle of the last century to make its educational management. It needs to consider academic innovation allied to university social responsibility. Also, nowadays it is known that HEIs are encouraged to adopt the principles that shape corporate governance. These strategies are necessary because, as the interviewees report, one of the most required demands by the education market is the proposition of solutions that can be applied to the corporate context, contributing to a lower distance between the world of education and the job market.

Corporate governance is suggested as an alternative because it is capable of proposing a more dynamic, versatile management, attentive to the methods that can bring the two spheres together. Adopting corporate governance to propose an education that is engaged with the job market demands breaking away from the pillars that support the administration of education in our country, which, for many of the interviewees, is still a distant reality.

The limitations of the research stem from the study of a large country like Brazil, with 213 million inhabitants, in which different levels of human development, cultures, and regions coexist, where there are social problems, and a culture that does not understand education as the greatest contribution to development. Therefore, tracing a profile only of the Southern region can mean bringing a more positive picture, because when the systems translate the learning indicators, in this region this performance is highlighted when verified with the other regions of Brazil. Another limitation falls on the view of the respondents, in times of the Covid 19 Pandemic and at a time when there was a very clear concern with the sustainable maintenance of their institutions.

As a suggestion for new lines of investigation, systemic management needs to be deepened in educational institutions, as they must be born from listening to the client, in this case, the student, professors, and other professionals; and this should be done in the institution's self-assessment process. In addition, another suggested line of investigation is the management of student permanence in the institution. It is known that dropout is a recurring theme in higher education. Many of the students give up studying halfway through lack of stimuli, mobilizations, financial issues, life projects aligned with career, learning difficulties, lack of inclusion policies, and disinterest due to the curriculum being disjointed with society, among others.

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