

**PREDATORY COMPETITION, STUDENT EXPECTATIONS, UNCLEAR PURPOSE:
UNIVERSITY LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
IN BRAZIL**

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INTRODUCTION

The new millennium has witnessed external and internal factors significantly increasing competition among many higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide (Hart and Rodgers 2023). One such context is Brazil, where, although the first university was made official by the government only in 1920, it is the fourth largest nation after China, India, and the United States regarding the number of student enrolments in higher education (UNESCO 2022). Among the private and public universities in Brazil, 89% of new students represent private institutions. Brazil is currently facing a competitive structure closer to an oligopoly, as only nine private educational groups hold more than 58% of the Brazilian higher education market share (UNESCO 2022). Brazil is also experiencing predatory competition in education, which brings enormous challenges to university managers (Peixoto & Silva, 2022).

Meanwhile, rising student expectations have been overlooked by universities worldwide (Bartunek & Ren, 2022). Negligence may be even more detrimental to HEIs in highly competitive scenarios. In Brazil, students highly anticipate that universities will contribute rapidly to their social and economic growth, which is sometimes frustrating because of the social inequality that traditionally marks Brazil (Carvalhaes, Senkevics & Ribeiro 2023b). Unfortunately, 'there is no room for everyone', and the unclear purpose of Brazilian universities seems to aggravate this situation. The great turbulence in Brazil is specifically derived from political and economic instabilities, causing many universities to lose their positioning and prioritise market logic, thus leaving science and knowledge on the back burner (Doidge & Doyle, 2022).

Therefore, questions arise about how the growing competition between universities is intertwined with student expectations and the purpose of universities and how entangling such forces may influence higher education. This study examines the role of predatory competition, student expectations, and unclear institutional purposes in shaping the main management challenges present in Brazilian universities by exploring the experiences, perceptions, and recommendations of rectors and academic directors of Brazilian universities regarding the future of higher education in the country. Research questions that guide this study are as follows:

- (1) *What are the main factors that will influence the future of higher education in its management aspects?*
- (2) *How can we relate these factors to higher education management (in the present and the future)?*
- (3) *What recommendations can be established for universities to have their management 'focused on the future'?*

RESEARCH ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The legitimacy of higher education has been questioned because of several societal transformations (Moscardini et al., 2023; Smolentseva, 2023). Consequently, the number of studies on transforming how we 'think' and 'manage' universities has been increasing substantially (Hart & Rodgers, 2023; Spada et al., 2022). However, a few studies deal with the

future of higher education management by diagnosing the present (Carayannis & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022).

Studies investigating the future of higher education have made important conceptual and practical contributions and can be organised on three main fronts. The first front focuses on the influence of macro-environmental aspects, such as the digital transformation the education sector has been undergoing (Abdullah, 2023; De Barros, Prasad & Silva, 2023; Milićević et al., 2021), the sustainable management of HEIs that involves the social aspects of diversity management and the necessary socio-emotional support for students (Cuesta-Claros et al., 2022; Kay & Young, 2022; Tasdemir & Gazo, 2020), long-lasting impacts of COVID-19 on educational institutions (Doidge & Doyle, 2022; Secundo et al., 2021), and the intense changes in the labour market (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022; Gu et al., 2018; Petruzzello et al., 2023).

The second research front deals with the primary stakeholders of universities with studies addressing current changes in student experience (Cavallone et al., 2022; Fan et al., 2023) and professors' expectations about the quality of universities and their careers (Cavallone et al., 2022; Cohen & Davidovitch, 2023). The third research front deals directly with university management, highlighting the choice of university curricula and their transformations (Bartunek & Ren, 2022; Gu et al., 2018; Tasdemir & Gazo, 2020), discussing the purpose of universities in our era (Guyottot & Thelisson, 2023; Moscardini, Strachan & Vlasova, 2022; Smolentseva, 2023), and the performance and competitiveness of HEIs (Cheah et al., 2023; Guyottot & Thelisson, 2023; Hart & Rodgers, 2023). Most studies have only focused on a specific factor explaining the phenomenon or a distinct analysis level. The epistemological analysis that includes different analysis levels (e.g. macro, meso, and micro) and/or explanatory factors (e.g. competition, students, and purpose) for a holistic and integrative view in treating this phenomenon is missing.

Studies referring to the future of universities are theoretical (Smolentseva, 2023; Moscardini, Strachan & Vlasova, 2022) or empirical, with data collection conducted predominantly in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan (Carayannis & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022; Cavallone et al., 2022; Cheah et al., 2023; Guyottot & Thelisson, 2023; Spada et al., 2022). Only a few studies have empirically explored this topic in the Global South (Arantes, 2021; Doidge & Doyle, 2022; Peixoto & Silva, 2022), such as in the case of Brazil. In addition, literature has prioritised the 'voices' of students and professors as evidence of the future of universities (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2023; Fan et al., 2023; Gu et al., 2018; Kay & Young, 2022), with limited studies highlighting the voices of university managers (Cheah et al., 2023; Guyottot & Thelisson, 2023).

In summary, the literature has several gaps that must be addressed. First, research on higher education is scarce in exploring the future. Second, the few studies on the future of universities have unexplored different analysis levels or stakeholders in their investigative processes. Third, research on the future of universities has ignored empirical investigations incorporating the views of the countries of the Global South, such as Brazil. Finally, a few empirical studies on the future of universities have been conducted through interviews and questionnaires in which the participants were students and professors and excluded the voices of university managers to shape the future of higher education and manage it. This study aims to address these gaps.

METHODS

This study is integrated with a broad set of studies on university management. We conducted a qualitative investigation using 42 in-depth interviews with university rectors and directors. The participants signed an informed consent form (ICF) agreeing to participate in the study. The

interviews generated more than 482 pages of transcripts and dealt with the perception of individuals regarding uncertain and complex social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2016), such as the future of universities. Following Gehart Jr. (2004), we considered the importance of qualitative methods for developing a theory. The author highlights the richness of analysing real-world situations, experiences, and perceptions. Therefore, we adopted a percept that the good construction of theory requires a methodical work of systematisation of data.

The present inductive study follows an epistemological approach that emphasises its relevance in addressing major social challenges, such as the future of universities. This phenomenon has significant economic and social implications simultaneously exchanging technical and social aspects and presents several possible evolution paths. Such characteristics are typical of phenomena for which qualitative and inductive research is scientifically relevant (Bansal, Smith & Vaara, 2018).

Based on this rationale, this article can be classified as a pre-theoretical paper. The study was initiated by guiding questions and presenting results to understand new or emerging themes, had an empirical character, and did not start from pre-established hypotheses or propositions. Therefore, this study did not start with a great theory as an investigative guide (Robinson, 2019) because of the absence of prior theories that can explain the new phenomena in question. In addition, articles of this nature commonly present new or unexpected results either in whole or part. This classification system guided our investigation in Brazil.

Data Collection

Data collection was based on the three research questions mentioned above. The interviewees were invited to provide their views on the future of universities regarding management. Their answers about the factors that will affect universities in the future and how university management can respond to these factors guided our data interpretation process.

For all interviews conducted, we established the same cumulative criteria for selecting participants: (a) acting, or having worked in the last three years as a rector or university director in Brazil; (b) carrying out academic activities in the dimensions of teaching, research, and extension; and (c) having their professional trajectory recognised by the academic community, with extensive experience in the area of expertise. We selected university rectors and directors for their academic trajectories, which provide accumulated knowledge about the current challenges experienced by universities and paths for the future of university management.

The initial participants were easily contacted as they were part of the professional network of the authors of this article. We used the snowball technique to select other participants, respecting the pre-established criteria for selecting respondents. Participants were initially contacted via e-mail. In addition, direct contact was established with some respondents via social media to schedule the interviews. Of the 46 rectors and directors contacted, 42 agreed to participate.

The interviews were conducted for approximately 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed, generating more than 482 pages of transcription. We used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the respondents and encouraged the free expression of ideas.

All participants were instructed to deliver their personal but not institutional views on the present and future of universities to their management. After conducting all interviews, new elements related to the central question were no longer present; that is, the answers began to present types of patterns between the groups of interviewees (Creswell, 2017). Table 1 presents an outline of the participants.

Table 1. The outline of the participants

No.	Pseudonym	Sex	Type of current HEI	Position	Large educational groups
1	Roberto	Male	Private	Current	No
2	Mariana	Female	Private	Current	Yes
3	Felipe	Male	Private	Current	No
4	Rodrigo	Male	Public	Current	No
5	Sebastião	Male	Private	Current	No
6	Pedro	Male	Private	Current	No
7	Maria	Female	Private	Current	No
8	Lucas	Male	Private	Current	No
9	Patrícia	Female	Public	Current	No
10	Mateus	Male	Private	Current	No
11	Joana	Female	Private	Current	No
12	Evaldo	Male	Private	Current	Yes
13	Bruna	Female	Private	Current	No
14	Sérgio	Male	Private	Current	No
15	Henrique	Male	Public	Current	No
16	Cristiano	Male	Private	Current	Yes
17	Francisco	Male	Private	Current	No
18	Carolina	Female	Private	Current	No
19	Marcio	Male	Private	Current	No
20	Diogo	Male	Private	Current	No
21	Jorge	Male	Private	Current	No
22	Daniel	Male	Private	Current	No
23	Renato	Male	Private	Last three years	No
24	Vilma	Female	Private	Current	No
25	Silas	Male	Public	Last three years	No
26	Florianio	Male	Private	Current	No
27	Afonso	Male	Private	Last three years	Yes
28	Epitácio	Male	Private	Current	Yes
29	Júlio	Male	Private	Current	No
30	Catarina	Female	Private	Current	No
31	Getulio	Male	Private	Current	No
32	Humberto	Male	Private	Current	No
33	Rosana	Female	Private	Current	No
34	Michel	Male	Private	Current	No
35	Luís	Male	Private	Current	No
36	José	Male	Public	Last three years	No
37	Manuel	Male	Private	Current	No

38	João	Male	Private	Current	No
39	Oscar	Male	Private	Current	No
40	Caíque	Male	Private	Current	No
41	Helena	Female	Private	Current	No
42	Artur	Male	Private	Current	No

Note: Position indicates whether the participant is currently in or holds a position until 2020.

Large educational groups refer to participants currently working in one of the nine largest private education groups in Brazil.

Source: Based on the authors' interviews in 2023.

Data Analysis

The interview data was analysed using the content analysis technique, generating inferences about spoken/written content that deals with the social phenomenon (Langley et al., 2023; Parry, 2020), which is the present and future of universities in their management aspects. Therefore, this study adheres to the precepts of Bardin (2011), who proposed the following steps for content analysis: (1) organisation of the material used, including formulated questions, interviews, and transcriptions; (2) exploitation of the material (data encoding); and (3) derivation of categories. Following these steps, and based on our interpretation of the collected results, we selected significant categories of analysis according to the guidelines of Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Our data were predominantly analysed inductively because data collection occurred before examining the literature on the subject. We refined our categories of analysis with the collected data and the organisation of the codes, following the precepts of Corbin and Strauss (2015), thus adopting part of the steps of grounded theory as an investigation technique. This procedure helped verify the reliability of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We used strict criteria to control how the data were collected, coded, classified, and analysed according to the precepts of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019). We coded the data using the open coding methodology proposed by Locke (2001). We then identified the key concepts for the analysis and verified the relationships between them, forming categories and subcategories according to their nature and properties (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). After verifying the consistency of the concepts emerging from the discourses, we organised the data into descriptive categories based on the participants' reports. Figure 1 illustrates the steps involved in inductive data analysis.

While the market's predatory competitiveness operates at the macro level and affects the entire Brazilian higher education sector, the complex and multifaceted expectations of students operate at the meso level and influence all universities differently. Contrarily, the lack of clarity about institutional purposes corresponds to the micro level because it is present in certain universities. Based on this coding scheme, we organised our results and discussion sections by presenting and analysing our results through the interviewees' statements.

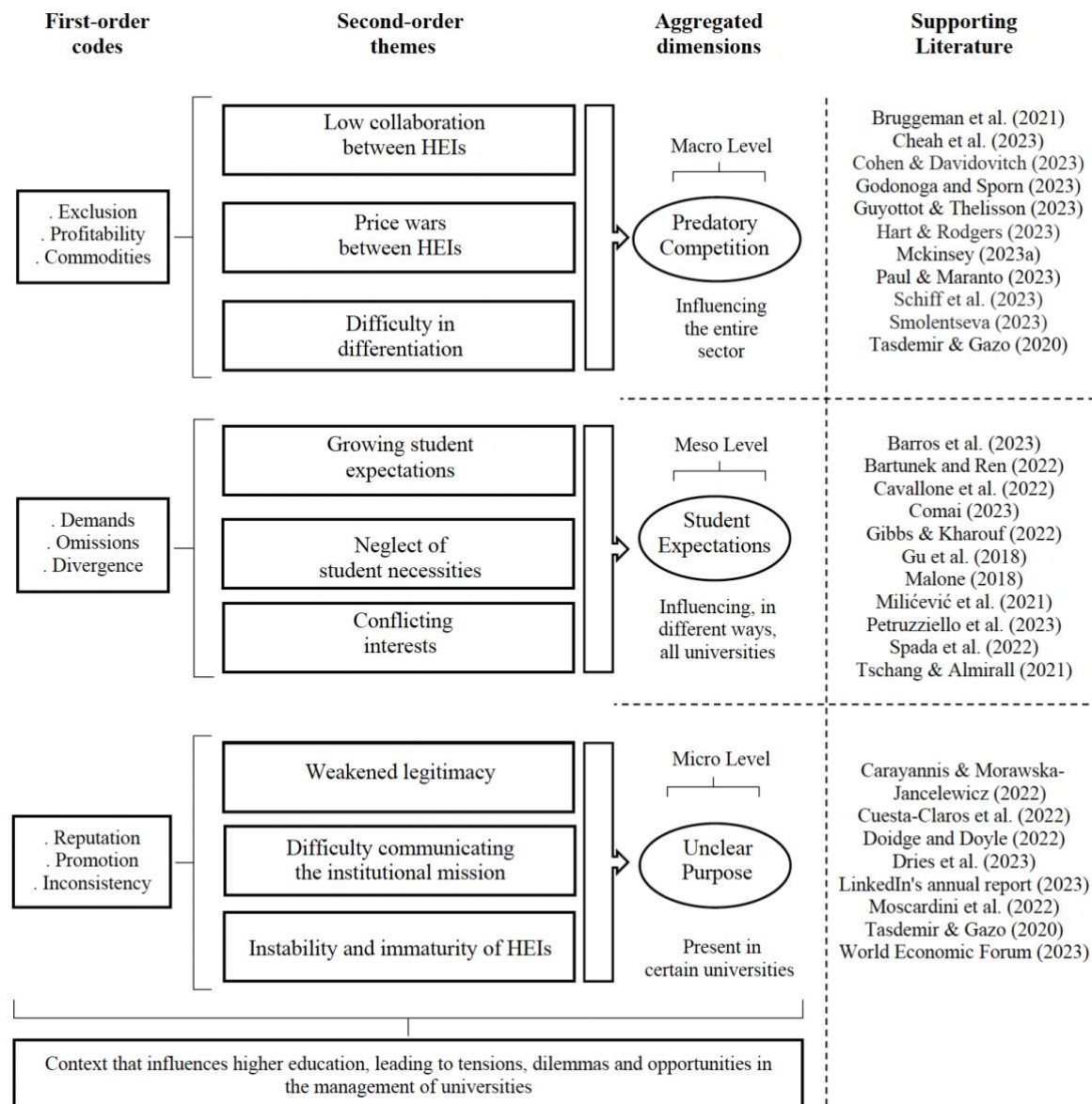


Figure 1. Steps of inductive data analysis.

Source: created by authors.

FINDINGS

Drawing on the narratives of the study participants, we present the main findings of their perceptions regarding the future challenges of university management in Brazil and focus on the macro (predatory competition), meso (student expectations), and micro (unclear purpose) level analysis. The interview data revealed numerous challenges of Brazil's complex contextual academic environment.

Many Brazilian universities suffer (and/or will suffer) from predatory competition

Both private and public universities compete regarding students, qualified academics, research publishing, obtaining funds, and academic reputation rankings (Hart & Rodgers, 2023). Intensified competition in Brazil is highlighted by many participants who observe the absence of a more collaborative vision among the market players of HEIs.

Brazil's educational model encourages competition more than collaboration, and I think that this is a major flaw because it does not hold up eventually. (Patrícia)

The education market still lacks collaboration and its principles. We are still in a very competitive dimension. This is aggressive. This approach is far from collaborative. We use market logic. (Mariana)

We are currently in a market dispute. The need for competitiveness can result in setbacks. I wish we could cooperate more because science, teaching, and extension only grow with cooperation. We grew only through networking. (Pedro)

Limited collaboration and competition among universities under large private educational groups in Brazil have almost created an oligopoly market (Arantes, 2021). Especially for the participants who work in institutions that do not belong to the large educational groups, the market has turned into a real 'price war'.

When competing with these large groups, although you may have higher quality, your cost is higher. Therefore, you cannot compete on prices. The Brazilian market is currently experiencing predatory competition. In practice, the prices are very low. (Diogo)

Brazilian private universities that do not belong to these large groups cannot compete with them from the perspective of autonomy, supply, or finances. Some universities do not need to make a profit because they have shares listed on the stock exchange. When they want to buy and expand their universities, they launch new stock offerings. (Daniel)

By adopting a cost leadership strategy, which is difficult to copy (Barney & Hesterly, 2019) by universities that are not part of the large educational groups, private institutions, identified as 'predators', lead others to position themselves by differentiation to maintain their competitiveness (Porter, 2011). However, many students did not perceive this differentiation because of the flight of students.

A significant price war has occurred in the Brazilian market. This has brought about a great flight of students, especially to institutions that offer distance courses because they are cheaper. (Jorge)

In Brazil, only nine private groups hold more than 58% of the market share and have been responsible for extensive mergers, acquisitions, and incorporations, sometimes making competition predatory (Peixoto & Silva, 2022). Therefore, the private sector in higher education is responsible for 89% of the new students (UNESCO 2022). Consequently, there has been a 125.7% increase in demand for distance learning courses between 2018 and 2022 offered by the nine private groups mentioned above (Carvalhoes, Medeiros & Santos, 2023a; INEP 2022). Intensified competition reduced the collaboration between universities, a price war, and student fights between HEIs. University managers outside the large economic groups, although promising differentiation, have difficulty delivering a single mix of value to their students that adopt a low-cost and low-differentiation strategy (Porter, 2011).

We noticed a fierce competition between price and quality. Nowadays, we see private institutions in Brazil selling courses at much lower prices, without properly guiding students, and with a series of weaknesses in teaching. (Vilma)

Many Brazilian students have (and/or will have) complex and multifaceted expectations

Participants indicated growing expectations and demands of students from the university as the most influential factors affecting university management. Several student demands involving financial, occupational, emotional, and curricular aspects are neglected by Brazilian HEIs (Bartunek & Ren, 2022).

What I see is mainly the culture of immediacy. Students want everything for today, for yesterday even, and solve the problem of academic formation within an increasingly short cycle. In the past, they were more accustomed to entering a 5- or 4-year course and then seeking personal and professional fulfilment. However, the situation has changed in Brazil. (Artur)

Many Brazilian students seem to place money and employability at the top of their expectations, increasing pressure on university administrators. Faculty support these students' psychological well-being and equip them with fundamental competencies (Gu et al., 2018; Petruzzello et al., 2023). This view is mainly present in the reports of managers of private institutions regardless of whether they belong to large educational groups.

What is success for some students? It's about making money, either as an entrepreneur or a company employee. This is a very important view since attending a Brazilian university is far from guaranteeing money and, even less, getting rich, an expectation that is present in many students. (Epitácio)

Today, we must also compete with students in the market. For example, if a Brazilian student is in the first year of computer engineering and has a job offer, he/she does not think twice about dropping out of university or accepting the job offer for which he/she is minimally qualified. (Silas)

The narratives above reveal that the expectations of some students may conflict with those of other stakeholders, such as their professors. While students show a growing interest in the functional attributes of educational services, which are directly linked to how much the university contributes to their professional growth, professors may sometimes detach themselves from the market view of this relationship, prioritising social relationships with students (Cavallone et al., 2022). These conflicting interests undermine the contemporary importance of universities. The conflict between functional attributes and social relationships is especially present in the discourse of participants who work in public institutions, possibly because they depend less on the market for their performance.

The student looks at the university and often sees an ageing institution that does not move at the student's speed and does not seem to be on the student's team. In this context, the Brazilian society questions the value of universities. (Patrícia)

Brazil's socioeconomic characteristics influence the perceptions regarding student expectations. Classified as an emerging country (IMF 2024), Brazil has a large consumer market, a large volume of labour, a medium-level human development index, and is marked by traditional social inequality (Carvalhaes, Senkevics & Ribeiro, 2023b; Costa, 2022). In addition, according to Hofstede's (2024) cultural classification, Brazil has a low long-term orientation. Therefore, Brazilian students' expectations, sometimes immediate, of accelerated social and economic ascension through the university bring great challenges to higher education managers, irrespective of public or private institutions.

Many Brazilian universities are unclear about their purpose (for the present and/or the future)

Without the clarity to establish the purposes of universities and communicate their differentials to Brazilian society, educational managers may find it difficult to raise universities' social prestige. Occasionally, educational institutions can naturally close themselves in their challenging organisational routines and lose, or not even develop, their ability to communicate strategically with their external audience (Doidge & Doyle, 2022).

The world will not wait. If a university cannot deliver to Brazilian society what it wants, it will look elsewhere. The farther we go, the more we will preach in the wilderness because the world will move on. (Rosana)

We need to prioritise communication and show society the importance of activities in higher education to develop collectively. (Oscar)

Many participants highlighted that Brazilian universities have difficulty clarifying their purpose and communicating it to society, posing a great challenge for their managers. Managers of smaller and newer private institutions have primarily highlighted this process due to failures in strategic planning by universities, which involves errors in formulating institutional strategy regarding values, mission, vision, objectives, and goals and in executing what was planned (Hart & Rodgers, 2023).

There is no point in creating a beautiful and nice strategic plan and modifying it all the time. In practice, this means that they are not being followed. (Manuel)

Each institution is in a separate world. It must have its mission and value in its activities. In Brazil, we do not use strategic diagnostic and analytical tools to check whether we are following our goals or where we can improve. (Renato)

Brazil has been classified as a recent country in the scientific and university environments since the establishment of its first university in 1920, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Brazil has an unstable political and economic environment regarding risk ratings, particularly economic growth and governance issues (Fitch Ratings, 2024; Riccomini et al., 2021). This scenario can shift the purpose of universities from meeting market logic to the detriment of science (Doidge & Doyle, 2022), bringing inconsistencies regarding their institutional missions. The frequent macro-environmental changes can also hinder the strategic plan of Brazilian universities and deliver a negative perception of the reality of higher education.

However, the reality in Brazilian universities is very difficult. If you do not communicate well and do not have adequate argumentative effort, your proposals will clearly be ignored. (Francisco)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

To deal with the lack of collaboration between Brazilian HEIs, price wars, and student dropouts, many participants reported adopting an institutional strategy by expanding educational services (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022) that increasingly diversify universities' revenue sources.

With vacant spaces in units due to reduced demand for face-to-face courses, the diversification of revenue sources has become essential to prevent Brazilian universities from relying exclusively on face-to-face courses. (Henrique)

With the drop in the share of face-to-face undergraduate courses in the revenue of Brazilian universities (INEP 2022), participants highlighted the need to gain from alternative teaching, research, and extension initiatives. The most outstanding activities are business consulting, scientific and business events, government partnerships, obtaining resources through development agencies, revenue from international students, offering niche courses to the market, and alumni programs that rely on donations from students and companies. Many participants reported that these initiatives depended primarily on the approach of universities to the market and a greater understanding of their needs.

The university must go out of its way to discuss and plan its curriculum with companies, knowing exactly what professional companies need. (Sebastião)

This approach essentially diversifies university revenue and is important for managers of private institutions. The Brazilian university context is known for the gap between universities and companies (Peixoto & Silva, 2022), making this approach even more strategic for universities to accomplish it more intensively (Hart & Rodgers, 2023).

There is no shortage of Brazilian business companies willing to finance university models focused on social demands. The company could donate money to a scholarship fund and include it in its sustainability report. (Sérgio)

To meet the expectations of Brazilian students and improve their experiences at university, many participants reported the necessity of adopting a service management perspective to analyse the increasing demands of students (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022).

Many students work all day. These are Brazilian people who attend college to fulfil their dreams. I need to take this student's hands and help the student. Place the student at the centre. This does not mean doing everything one wants, but there is a fine line between meeting one's expectations and complying with the rules established for educational institutions. (Helena)

Many Brazilian universities sometimes neglect individualised student services that critically prevent student dropouts, increase student engagement, optimise academic results, and improve satisfaction (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022). This issue becomes more challenging while Brazilian universities balance their norms, beliefs, values, and routines with student expectations.

We must understand this new audience and seek faster solutions to adapt to them, meet new demands, and introduce more technology into classrooms without straying from our basic values, that is, to teach people, to develop better professionals for the job market who meet the needs of Brazilian society and who are better Brazilian citizens. (Felipe)

Participants also highlighted that the Brazilian university must keep 'people at the centre' of its activities of providing knowledge services while adopting new methodologies and technologies in its teaching and learning process. Managers who work in private universities that do not belong to large educational groups support this view, demonstrating increasing differentiation in the market.

The invitation is for us to have technology as an ally, not a substitute. This is the future of institutions. The relationship must be between the human being and the machine, not the machine detracting from the human being. (Lucas)

Participants highlighted modern methodologies for improving the student experience, such as employing artificial intelligence, intensifying blended learning, digitalising universities' internal processes, and developing online training for students' socio-emotional well-being for rethinking the relationship between people and technology in universities (De Barros, Prasad, & Silva, 2023; Mckinsey, 2023).

To follow an institutional purpose, Brazilian HEIs must be aware of their roles in society (Moscardini, Strachan & Vlasova, 2022). Many participants reported that an educational service aligned with the future demands of society as one of their central roles.

Brazilian universities offer lifelong education, not just education focused on a specific moment so that the individual can solve social problems. It transcends content-based training to develop leaders, researchers, scientists, and politicians. (Cristiano)

Participants specifically highlighted the importance of current technology and innovation necessary for future professionals. Several professions are reinventing themselves, and new professions are emerging. Both require the support of universities in developing professionals (Dries, Luyckx & Rogiers, 2023).

I cannot believe that Brazilian universities will cease to be relevant. Organisations require professionals. As much as we have robots, we have artificial intelligence; we have all that. People need to learn, don't they? No one is born knowing. We will continue to educate people. (Carolina)

Many participants consider the central purpose of universities should not only focus on the technical development of professionals but also the education of citizens for greater social awareness. Managers of smaller private institutions report this situation primarily in their search for increasing differentiation. Participants recognise that the best way to verify whether the purpose of a Brazilian university converges with society's expectations lies precisely in the balance between professional and citizen training. This convergence creates a sustainable future and contributes to the sustainable development goals proposed by the United Nations (Tasdemir & Gazo, 2020). Brazilian universities must expand their performance beyond the mere employability of their students and be closer to a much broader social transformation towards a sustainable society to educate citizens and prepare them to contribute to a rapidly changing world (Cuesta-Claros et al., 2022).

The role of Brazilian universities is to develop professionals to work in a changing world and prepare citizens for debates on the problems that will affect society in the coming decades. Therefore, there is a great opportunity to review the content of courses and take advantage of the opportunities that arise. (Florianio)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study reports that managers, especially those who work in more recent private universities and do not belong to the large educational groups that dominate higher education in Brazil, may face the highest management challenges in the future. The results indicate the complex academic environment of Brazilian HEIs, characterised by predatory competition, students' complex and multifaceted expectations, and a lack of clarity regarding the purpose of many universities. The main findings of this study are as follows:

Intensified competition between universities (Hart & Rodgers, 2023) and the consequent difficulty Brazilian universities face (Peixoto & Silva, 2022) are major causes of concern for university management. Brazilian higher education is characterised by dominant private groups, bringing this market closer to an oligopoly (Arantes, 2021; Carvalhaes, Senkevics & Ribeiro, 2023b). Universities belonging to these large private groups have adopted low-price policies based on distance learning (INEP 2022), intensifying the sector's price war. Other universities find it challenging to justify their high prices by offering differentiated educational services to their target audiences. However, the differentiation of these universities has had been difficult in Brazilian market, which has led to the migration of students to lower-priced universities, echoing the existing literature (Arantes, 2021; Peixoto & Silva, 2022).

Students' experience has been realised as one of the main concerns of Brazilian university management. The university is a social entity that must deliver knowledge, skills, norms, and values through transmission, transformation, and creation of ideas (Smolentseva, 2023). Because of the complexity of this delivery, several student demands have been neglected by universities, as evidenced by Bartunek and Ren (2022), especially regarding the delivery of fundamental technical skills for students' professional futures (Gu et al., 2018; Petruzzello et al., 2023). Brazil showcases its increasing demand for higher education; however, its scientific and university environment is recent. Therefore, although students demand university experience to accelerate social and economic ascension (Petruzzello et al., 2023), some Brazilian universities are unprepared to meet these demands in the global academic scenario (Bartunek & Ren, 2022; Do Amaral, Romani-Dias & Walchutter, 2022).

The purpose of universities has also been questioned and indicated as a major concern for university management. Doidge & Doyle, (2022) identified the lack of clarity of universities about their institutional missions as a significant factor. In Brazil, apart from the lower average age of universities, political and economic scenarios change abruptly (Fitch Ratings, 2024), reducing the ability of university managers to anticipate trends in the education sector. Consequently, this hinders the strategic planning of universities and, thus, the execution of what was planned (Hart & Rodgers, 2023).

The study's empirical evidence provides insights for supporting future research on the perceptions and recommendations of university managers in countries that may share a few characteristics with Brazil (BRICs- Brazil, Russia, India, and China), such as the large population, extensive territory, economic potential, regional influence, and especially the strong expansion of higher education in recent decades (Altbach et al., 2013; Froumin & Platonova, 2020). The study recommendations may assist Brazilian universities in positioning themselves toward the future by adopting an expansion strategy regarding their educational services based on constant dialogue with the market, developing modern service management that puts people at the centre and improves the experience of its students, and defining a clear institutional purpose aligned with the demands of society and the principles of sustainability and social responsibility (Avelar et al., 2022).

This study has two main limitations. First, the inductive nature of the study led us to define three aggregate dimensions: 'predatory competition', 'student expectations', and

‘unclear purpose’. Although the study participants justified these categories through their choices, the choices can be broad, and the interpretation can depend on their backgrounds. Second, we chose only the top managers of the university (rectors and directors) as they contemplated the institutional strategy and the future of the HEIs. Despite this justified choice, listening to students, professors, and other stakeholders close to the universities enriched our study.

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