

The Influence of Cultural Factors on the Marketing Strategies of Higher Education Institutions in the Countries of the Region

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of cultural factors on the formulation and implementation of marketing strategies in higher education institutions across the countries of the region. The research was conducted on a sample of 740 respondents from higher education institutions in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. A quantitative research approach was applied, employing descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and cluster analysis. The results reveal a strong and statistically significant impact of cultural dimensions – particularly intercultural competencies and cultural distance – on various aspects of marketing strategies in higher education institutions. Cluster analysis identified three clearly differentiated types of institutions, which significantly differ in their cultural profiles and the intensity of marketing strategy implementation. The findings confirm the importance of the cultural context as a relevant factor in strategic marketing management in higher education and highlight the need for its more systematic integration into institutional development strategies.

Keywords: *cultural factors, higher education, marketing of higher education institutions, digital communication in education, Western Balkans.*

Introduction

Contemporary higher education systems operate under conditions of intensified competition, internationalization, and accelerated technological development, which have significantly transformed the role and position of higher education institutions. In

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addition to their primary educational and scientific functions, these institutions increasingly operate within the market of educational services, where they are expected to engage in strategic positioning, maintain active communication with diverse target groups, and continuously enhance their institutional image. In this context, marketing strategies have become one of the key instruments of institutional development and competitive differentiation.

Although the importance of marketing in higher education has been increasingly recognized in academic literature, there remains a notable lack of empirical research that systematically examines the role of cultural factors in shaping marketing strategies. Cultural dimensions, including value systems, linguistic and communication specificities, cultural distance, and intercultural competencies, constitute an important yet insufficiently explored framework for understanding the behavior of higher education institutions and student perceptions. Building on this premise, the present study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interaction between culture and marketing in higher education, with particular emphasis on the regional context. The subject of this research is the analysis of the influence of cultural factors on the development of marketing strategies in higher education institutions. The aim of the paper is to empirically examine the impact of cultural dimensions on specific elements of marketing strategies and to determine their role in enhancing marketing practice, internationalization processes, and the competitiveness of higher education institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Digital transformation represents one of the key changes in the higher education sector, as it affects the organization of teaching, data management, and communication with students. The development of analytical tools and digital systems has led to the transformation of traditional models of governance in educational institutions. Mickov (2025) emphasizes that universities must ensure high-quality education under conditions of intensive technological innovation and increasing levels of student digital literacy.

As highlighted by Selwyn (2021), the digitalization of education is not solely a technological process, but also a socio-cultural one that influences values, academic roles, and institutional priorities. Universities face the need to develop new staff competencies, improve digital teaching content, and introduce systems for real-time learning monitoring.

Monitoring key performance indicators represents an important segment of digital governance. Tomić (2012) points out that indicators such as website engagement, the number of prospective students, conversion rates, and digital promotion costs constitute the basis for evaluating marketing activities. Singh and Sohrab (2025) emphasize that digital marketing plays a significant role in shaping the branding of higher education institutions and influencing students' enrollment decisions, with indicators such as digital platform engagement and content interaction serving as key measures of marketing effectiveness and institutional visibility.

According to UNESCO (2019), marketing in higher education implies proactive management of relationships with target groups through the integration of various elements of the marketing mix. The British Council (2017) emphasizes that sustainable competitive advantage is based on the quality of knowledge, institutional reputation, and innovativeness, which requires strategic management of digital transformation and institutional identity. Digital marketing enables universities to increase visibility, improve enrollment trends, and strengthen institutional reputation. Ostojić and Leko Šimić (2021) confirm that digital communication and branding practices play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of higher education institutions and their competitive position in the educational environment.

Previous research indicates that cultural factors significantly influence marketing strategies in higher education, particularly in the ways universities adapt their communication practices and digital presence to different cultural contexts (Tang, 2011). Research by Parlakkiliç (2022) demonstrates that mobile optimization of university websites significantly enhances user experience, while O'Donnell and Sharp (2011) emphasize the importance of culturally adapted digital communication in the context of growing demand for online education. Live streaming through platforms such as TikTok enables direct interaction with students and increases real-time engagement (Abadi & Ivoniasari, 2024). Online reviews and electronic word-of-mouth communication also play a significant role in the digital environment, as they influence decision-making processes of prospective students (Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008; Ismagilova et al., 2020). Collaboration with social media influencers can positively affect institutional brand perception and enrollment decisions (Jiménez Castillo & Sánchez Fernández, 2019; Migkos, Giannakopoulos & Sakas, 2025). Instagram stands out as a particularly relevant platform, as visual content and interaction significantly influence the choice of higher education institutions (de los Reyes, 2023). According to Theobald and Jentschke (2020), digital channels shape the overall user experience and perception of institutional brands.

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping marketing strategies in higher education, particularly in the context of internationalization. They influence student values, norms, and expectations, as well as approaches to communication with international markets. Webber and Boehmer (2008) discuss the complex balancing act faced by higher education institutions in maintaining accountability, access, and organizational effectiveness, highlighting the need for strategic management and adaptive practices in competitive educational environments. Camilleri (2019) emphasizes that universities in the digital era must apply a holistic marketing approach that integrates digital and traditional communication channels. Social media platforms, video content, and analytical tools have become key elements of digital strategies (Abadi & Ivoniasari, 2024; Gonzalez & Wu, 2018). The use of Instagram facilitates the development of emotional connections and student identification with institutional brands (de los Reyes, 2023), while two-way communication contributes to higher levels of user engagement (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Tierney and Lanford (2015) argue that the success of international branch campuses depends not only on economic and managerial factors, but also on the alignment of organizational culture between home and branch institutions, as well as on how institutional values are interpreted across different cultural contexts. In the context of internationalization, universities must adapt their messages to the cultural norms and expectations of target groups (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Ahmad and Buchanan (2017) indicate that location attractiveness also influences institutional choice, while Hung and Yen (2022) emphasize that sustainable internationalization is achievable only through the integration of analytical approaches and cultural sensitivity. Contemporary research in the field of education indicates that partnerships between institutions and relevant stakeholders represent a key mechanism for improving educational outcomes and communication quality, where joint action is based on shared responsibilities, resources, and objectives (Stevanović & Trajković, 2024). In this regard, digital marketing represents a strategic tool for positioning universities in the global education market.

Research

In the contemporary context of intensified competition, internationalization, and digital transformation of higher education, marketing strategies represent a significant instrument for positioning higher education institutions. In the countries of the region, there is still a lack of empirical research that systematically examines how cultural determinants influence the formation and effectiveness of marketing strategies. The research problem is therefore focused on the insufficiently clarified relationship between cultural factors and marketing strategies of higher education institutions.

The subject of this research is the analysis of the influence of cultural factors on the marketing strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. The aim of the study is to empirically examine the impact of cultural factors on the perception and implementation of marketing strategies, as well as to identify factors that influence the choice of higher education institution, with the formulation of recommendations for improving marketing practice across different cultural contexts.

Cultural variables in this study were operationalized through multiple items related to students' perceptions of institutional values, communication practices, institutional identity, and the international orientation of higher education institutions. The value system was measured through attitudes toward the importance of education, academic success, and the role of the institution in the development of knowledge and competencies. Social identity and symbolism were measured through the perceived reputation of the institution, its visual identity, and public recognizability. Linguistic and communication specificities referred to the way institutions communicate with students, the use of digital communication channels, and the adaptation of communication to different target groups. Tradition and institutional heritage were

measured through attitudes toward the importance of tradition, institutional reputation, and historical development. Cultural distance and economic context were measured through perceptions of the adaptation of marketing activities to different cultural and economic environments, while intercultural competencies were measured through the institution's ability to attract international students, develop international partnerships, and operate in a multicultural environment.

Marketing strategies of higher education institutions were operationalized through several dimensions, including institutional image and positioning, communication channels and digital presence, intercultural adaptation of study programs, development of partnerships and student retention mechanisms, as well as digital innovativeness and marketing performance. All variables were measured using multiple items, with respondents indicating their level of agreement with the statements on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7. The study employed an author-designed questionnaire based on relevant theoretical and empirical research, and the reliability of the instrument was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The research presented in this study is focused on examining the influence of cultural determinants on the marketing strategies of higher education institutions through testing the following hypotheses:

Main Research Hypotheses

H1: Cultural determinants have a statistically significant influence formation and implementation of marketing strategies of higher education institutions in the countries of the region.

H2: Based on cultural factors, it is possible to identify different types, or clusters, of higher education institutions that differ statistically significantly in the application of marketing strategies.

Auxiliary Research Hypotheses

H1.1: The value system has a statistically significant influence on the elements of marketing strategy of higher education institutions.

H1.2: Social identity and symbolism have a statistically significant influence on the elements of marketing strategy of higher education institutions.

H1.3: Linguistic and communication specificity has a statistically significant influence on the elements of marketing strategy of higher education institutions.

H1.4: Tradition and institutional heritage have a statistically significant influence on the elements of marketing strategy of higher education institutions.

H1.5: Cultural distance and economic context have a statistically significant influence on the elements of marketing strategy of higher education institutions.

H1.6: Intercultural competencies have a statistically significant influence on the elements of marketing strategy of higher education institutions.

H2.1: There are statistically significant differences in the application of marketing strategies among the identified clusters of higher education institutions.

H2.2: The identified clusters differ statistically significantly with respect to cultural factors.

For data processing and analysis, the statistical software package IBM SPSS Statistics 26 was used. Descriptive statistical methods were applied to present the basic characteristics of the sample. Multiple regression analysis was employed to examine the influence of cultural factors on the elements of marketing strategies. To identify homogeneous groups of higher education institutions based on cultural factors, cluster analysis was applied, including hierarchical cluster analysis using the Ward method and K-means cluster analysis. Differences between the identified clusters in the application of marketing strategies were examined using analysis of variance. The level statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

The research was conducted between March and September 2025 and included a total of 740 respondents from higher education institutions in the countries of the region. The research sample consisted of students from higher education institutions in the countries of the region, as the primary target group of higher education marketing activities. Respondents were selected using a voluntary participation method through an online questionnaire distributed via institutional and student communication channels. The sample structure by type of institution indicates that the majority of respondents were students from private higher education institutions (68.4%), while 31.6% of respondents attended public higher education institutions. This sample structure enables the analysis of students' perceptions of marketing activities in different institutional contexts, given that private and public institutions apply different marketing approaches, levels of digital communication, and positioning strategies in the higher education market. Regarding territorial distribution, the sample comprised students from Serbia (33.4%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (20.0%), Croatia (12.8%), Slovenia (11.9%), North Macedonia (12.0%), and Montenegro (9.9%). This distribution ensures adequate regional representation and enables a comparative analysis of cultural and marketing patterns in higher education.

Research results

Descriptive statistics were applied to present the basic characteristics of the sample and general response patterns for the analyzed variables. The results of the descriptive analysis are presented in Table 1.

Descriptive statistics indicate moderately high mean values for all analyzed variables, suggesting a generally positive perception of both cultural factors and marketing strategy elements in higher education institutions. Mean values for cultural factors range from 4.23 to 4.78, with linguistic and communication specificity and intercultural competencies receiving the highest evaluations, while the value system received the lowest. Regarding marketing strategies, the highest mean values were recorded for intercultural adaptation of study programs and digital innovativeness, indicating the importance of modern and internationally oriented approaches in higher education. Standard deviation values indicate moderate response variability, while Cronbach's alpha coefficients, ranging from .71 to .82, confirm satisfactory internal consistency and reliability of all applied scales.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and reliability of variables

Variables	Mark	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Cronbach α
Value system	CF1	740	1	7	4.23	1.99	.71
Social identity and symbolism	CF2	740	1	7	4.60	1.79	.75
Linguistic and communication specificity	CF3	740	1	7	4.78	1.87	.74
Tradition and institutional heritage	CF4	740	1	7	4.68	1.87	.78
Cultural distance and economic context	CF5	740	1	7	4.66	2.14	.76
Intercultural competencies	CF6	740	1	7	4.71	2.21	.77
Institutional image and positioning	MS1	740	1	7	4.77	1.70	.75
Communication channels and digital presence	MS2	740	1	7	4.98	1.74	.80
Intercultural adaptation of study programs	MS3	740	1	7	5.02	1.76	.79
Partnership development and student retention	MS4	740	1	7	4.96	1.99	.82
Digital innovativeness and marketing performance	MS5	740	1	7	4.99	1.76	.79

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between cultural factors and elements of marketing strategies in higher education institutions. This analysis enables the identification of both the direction and strength of associations between variables and serves as a basis for subsequent regression and cluster analyses. The obtained correlation coefficients are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlation analysis of variables

Variables	CF1	CF2	CF3	CF4	CF5	CF6
MS1	.74**	.73**	.78**	.72**	.78**	.79**
MS2	.74**	.76**	.77**	.73**	.79**	.79**
MS3	.68**	.71**	.73**	.71**	.77**	.78**
MS4	.75**	.73**	.75**	.72**	.81**	.81**
MS5	.74**	.69**	.75**	.68**	.76**	.80**

Note. ** $p < .01$.

The correlation analysis shows positive and statistically significant relationships between all cultural factors and elements of marketing strategies at the $p < .01$ level. Correlation coefficients range from $r = .68$ to $r = .81$. The value system and linguistic and communication specificity exhibit strong correlations with institutional image and positioning, indicating the importance of social values and communication in building institutional image. Social identity and symbolism show a pronounced association with communication channels and digital presence, while tradition and institutional heritage display slightly lower correlations with digital innovativeness and marketing performance. The strongest correlations were observed for cultural distance and economic context and for intercultural competencies, particularly in relation to partnership development and marketing performance measurement. These findings indicate strong interdependence between cultural factors and marketing strategies, justifying further regression analysis.

All regression models presented in Table 3 are statistically significant at $p < .01$, confirming the appropriateness of multiple regression analysis. The coefficients of determination (R^2) indicate that cultural factors explain a substantial proportion of variance in marketing strategies, particularly in the domains of partnerships, positioning, and marketing performance.

Table 3
Results of multiple regression analysis

Variables	MS1	MS2	MS3	MS4	MS5
CF1	.09*	.04	-.05	.15*	.17*
CF2	.02	.14*	.05	.01	-.10*
CF3	.22*	.10	.07	-.04	.16*
CF4	-.05	-.02	-.00	-.09*	-.16*
CF5	.20*	.27*	.28*	.37*	.21*
CF6	.37*	.32*	.47*	.45*	.54*
R^2	.676	.680	.640	.704	.670
F (Sig.)	<.01	<.01	<.01	<.01	<.01

Note. * $p < .05$.

Based on the results presented in Table 3, it can be observed that cultural factors exert different magnitudes and directions of influence across individual dimensions of marketing strategy. Cultural distance and economic context (CF5) and intercultural competencies (CF6) demonstrate the most stable and strongest effects across all regression models. In contrast, certain cultural dimensions exhibit selective or negative effects, particularly in relation to traditional behavioral patterns.

The testing of the proposed hypotheses was conducted on the basis of multiple regression analysis, using coefficients of determination (R^2), standardized regression coefficients (β), and levels of statistical significance (p) as key evaluation criteria. The general research hypothesis H1 is fully supported, as all analyzed regression models are statistically significant ($p < .01$). The obtained R^2 values indicate that cultural factors

explain between 64.0% and 70.4% of the variance in marketing strategy dimensions (MS1: $R^2 = .67$; MS2: $R^2 = .68$; MS3: $R^2 = .64$; MS4: $R^2 = .70$; MS5: $R^2 = .67$), which represents a very high level of explained variance within the social sciences.

Hypothesis H1.6 is supported, as intercultural competencies (CF6) are identified as the strongest individual predictor in all regression models. This variable records the highest standardized regression coefficients across all outcomes (MS1: $\beta = .37$; MS2: $\beta = .32$; MS3: $\beta = .47$; MS4: $\beta = .45$; MS5: $\beta = .54$; $p < .01$), indicating a dominant and highly consistent influence on all elements of marketing strategy.

Hypothesis H1.5 is also largely supported, given that cultural distance and economic context (CF5) demonstrate statistically significant and stable effects on multiple dimensions of marketing strategy. The strongest effects are observed for communication channels and digital presence ($\beta = .27$), intercultural adaptation of study programs ($\beta = .28$), partnership development and student retention ($\beta = .37$), and digital innovativeness and marketing performance ($p < .01$).

Hypotheses H1.1 and H1.3 are supported, as the value system (CF1) and linguistic and communication specificity (CF3) show statistically significant effects on selected elements of marketing strategy, particularly institutional image and positioning, partnership development, student retention, and digital innovativeness and marketing performance ($p < .01$), but not across all analyzed outcomes.

Hypothesis H1.2 is supported to a limited extent, since social identity and symbolism (CF2) exhibit a moderate but statistically significant effect exclusively within the model of communication channels and digital presence (MS2; $R^2 = .67$). In contrast, hypothesis H1.4 is rejected, as tradition and institutional heritage (CF4) demonstrate negative and statistically significant effects in certain models, particularly in the domains of partnership development and student retention, as well as digital innovativeness and marketing performance. This finding indicates the presence of tension between traditional cultural patterns and contemporary, performance-oriented marketing approaches in higher education. This result indicates that a strong reliance on traditional values, organizational structures, and historically established models of operation may represent a limiting factor in the process of modernization and digital transformation in higher education. Although institutional heritage represents an important element of institutional identity and reputation, it may simultaneously act as a "burden of legacy" that slows down the adoption of contemporary marketing approaches, digital communication channels, and international cooperation. This finding supports the view that organizations with a long tradition often adopt innovations more slowly and face greater difficulty in changing established organizational models.

Cluster Analysis of Cultural Factors and Marketing Strategies

Cluster analysis was applied to identify homogeneous groups of higher education institutions based on cultural factors. Six cultural dimensions were operationalized as input variables: the value system (CF1), social identity and symbolism

(CF2), linguistic and communication specificity (CF3), tradition and institutional heritage (CF4), cultural distance and economic context (CF5), and intercultural competencies (CF6).

In the first phase, hierarchical cluster analysis using the Ward method and squared Euclidean distance was conducted to determine the optimal number of clusters. Based on dendrogram and agglomeration schedule analysis, three clusters were identified. In the second phase, K-means cluster analysis was applied, with convergence achieved after five iterations, indicating solution stability. These results confirm the main cluster hypothesis H2.

Table 4

Final cluster centroids by cultural factors

Cultural factors	Cluster 1 (n = 185)	Cluster 2 (n = 412)	Cluster 3 (n = 143)
CF1	1.18	5.44	4.65
CF2	1.93	5.79	4.63
CF3	1.96	6.08	4.71
CF4	1.85	5.94	4.70
CF5	1.26	6.10	4.91
CF6	1.24	6.22	4.87

The results indicate clear differences in cultural profiles among the identified clusters. Cluster 1 is characterized by consistently low values across all cultural dimensions, indicating institutions with traditional and relatively closed cultural models. Cluster 2 records the highest values in all dimensions, particularly intercultural competencies and cultural distance and economic context, reflecting globally oriented and strategically positioned institutions. Cluster 3 exhibits moderate values and represents institutions undergoing cultural and organizational transformation. Based on these findings, hypothesis H2.1 is supported.

Table 5

ANOVA results showing differences in marketing strategies between clusters

Marketing strategies	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
MS1	762.28	< .01
MS2	704.67	< .01
MS3	619.46	< .01
MS4	800.70	< .01
MS5	643.63	< .01

ANOVA results indicate statistically significant differences between clusters across all analyzed dimensions of marketing strategy at the $p < .01$ level. Particularly high F values were observed for partnership development and student retention and for institutional image and positioning, indicating that cluster membership strongly conditions the intensity and form of marketing strategy implementation. Hypothesis H2.2 is therefore fully supported.

Table 6
Mean values of marketing strategies by cluster

Marketing strategies	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
MS1	2.47	5.82	4.73
MS2	2.64	6.03	4.99
MS3	2.69	6.04	5.12
MS4	2.14	6.07	5.41
MS5	2.65	6.02	5.04

Analysis of mean values shows that Cluster 2 achieves the highest scores across all marketing strategies, while Cluster 1 records the lowest values and Cluster 3 occupies an intermediate position. These findings further confirm the ANOVA results and demonstrate the practical relevance of the identified clusters.

Based on the results presented, all cluster-related hypotheses are confirmed. Hypothesis H2 is supported through the identification of three clearly differentiated clusters. Hypothesis H2.1 is confirmed by significant differences in cultural factors between clusters, while hypothesis H2.2 is supported by statistically significant differences in the application of marketing strategies. The cluster analysis demonstrates that cultural profiles of higher education institutions condition distinct marketing approaches.

Discussion

The results of the regression analysis confirm that cultural factors exert a strong and statistically significant influence on the formation of marketing strategies in higher education institutions, which is consistent with theoretical perspectives emphasizing that marketing in higher education extends beyond purely technical and promotional dimensions. The particularly pronounced effects of intercultural competencies and cultural distance combined with the economic context support the findings of authors who argue that successful internationalization is achievable only through culturally sensitive and analytically grounded marketing approaches (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Hung & Yen, 2022). These results further reinforce the assertion that digital transformation in higher education must be accompanied by a strategic understanding of the cultural environment in which institutions operate (Selwyn, 2016; Camilleri, 2019).

Findings from the cluster analysis indicate the existence of clearly differentiated types of higher education institutions within the region, confirming that institutions do not respond uniformly to processes of digitalization and internationalization.

Clusters characterized by higher levels of intercultural competencies and linguistic and communication specificity simultaneously achieve higher levels of digital innovativeness, partnership development, and institutional image. This is consistent with previous research emphasizing that an active digital presence, including the use of social media, live streaming, and visual content, significantly influences institutional brand perception and student engagement (de los Reyes, 2023; Abadi & Ivoniasari, 2024). In contrast, clusters with lower cultural values exhibit limited adoption of contemporary marketing strategies, indicating the presence of structural and cultural barriers in transformation processes.

When interpreting the results, it is necessary to consider the sample structure, as the majority of respondents were students from private higher education institutions (68.4%), while students from public institutions accounted for 31.6% of the sample. Although public universities dominate in terms of the number of students in the region, private institutions operate in a more competitive environment and more extensively apply marketing strategies and digital communication. Therefore, students from private institutions tend to have a more pronounced perception of marketing activities, which is relevant to the subject of this research. However, this sample structure represents a certain limitation in terms of the generalization of the results, and future research should include a larger number of respondents from public universities.

The research results confirm theoretical assumptions according to which digital marketing in higher education cannot be effective without the integration of cultural factors into strategic planning. The findings align with the positions of UNESCO (2019) and the British Council (2017), which emphasize that sustainable competitiveness of higher education institutions depends on aligning digital strategies with institutional identity, value systems, and the expectations of diverse target groups. These results empirically demonstrate that cultural context does not represent a peripheral element of marketing activities, but rather their fundamental determinant, carrying important implications for future research and the practical implementation of marketing strategies at both regional and international levels.

Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that cultural factors play a significant role in shaping and implementing marketing strategies of higher education institutions in the countries of the region. The findings of the multiple regression analysis indicate a high level of explained variance in marketing strategies, with intercultural competencies and cultural distance combined with the economic context emerging as the strongest predictors. This underscores the importance of adaptability and international orientation in contemporary higher education.

The cluster analysis identified three clearly differentiated types of institutions that significantly differ in their cultural profiles and marketing approaches. These findings indicate that uniform marketing models are inadequate and that the development of differentiated, culturally sensitive strategies tailored to specific institutional contexts is necessary.

The practical contribution of this study lies in the application of its results to strategic planning and marketing management processes in higher education institutions, particularly with the aim of strengthening competitiveness in the international education market. The limitation of this study relates to the cross-sectional research design and the sample structure, in which students from private higher education institutions predominate, which may affect the generalizability of the results to the overall higher education system in the region. Future research may be directed toward longitudinal approaches, the inclusion of a larger number of public universities, and the expansion of the analysis to a broader institutional and international context.

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