

National Education Plan and inequalities in access to Higher Education in Brazil, 2014 -2022

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This paper explores inequalities in accessing higher education during the implementation of the National Education Plan (NEP) for the period 2014-2024. The study relies on documentary analysis and descriptive statistics, drawing upon official quantitative data extracted from the monitoring of the NEP 2014-2024, conducted by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (INEP). Additionally, it examines higher education data in the Synthesis of Social Indicators, provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), based on the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD), to identify disparities in the undergraduate student profile. Initially, the paper highlights the importance of the NEP and its influence on access to higher education. Following this, it identifies persistent factors contributing to inequalities in accessing higher education courses. In conclusion, addressing these inequalities demands significant effort and resistance, warranting consideration in the targets and strategies of the upcoming NEP.

Full paper

Introduction

The Brazilian higher education has historically been marked by profound inequalities. To expand and democratize access to higher education, targets were established to increase the gross enrolment rate (50%) and the net enrolment rate (33%) in undergraduate courses in the National Education Plan (NEP) for 2014-2024. This study focuses on the inequalities in access to higher education during the implementation of the NEP.

The study draws on documentary analysis and descriptive statistics, using official data extracted from the monitoring of the NEP, produced by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (INEP). In addition, it analyses higher education data in the Synthesis of Social Indicators, produced by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

This paper is structured into two sections. Firstly, it underscores the significance of the NEP in access to higher education. Secondly, it delves into an analysis of enrollment rates based on the socioeconomic characteristics of students.

The National Education Plan and the access to higher education

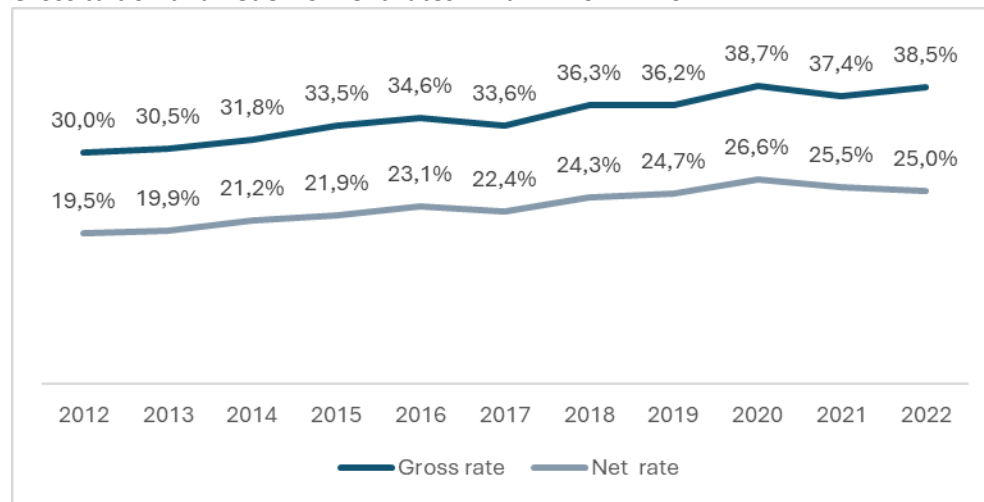
The NEP outlines the targets for all levels and modalities of education, including the higher education. Despite the progress made in the democratic construction and the monitoring and evaluation process of the Plan, the unstable political environment, and a lack of alignment between objectives of the NEP and the budget defined in public planning instruments had negative impacts on its results.

The landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to a decline in enrolments between 2020 and 2021. In 2022, this effect has been diluted and enrolments have recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

Consequently, by the end of the 2014 NEP, the targets for gross and net enrolment rates were not achieved. The low net enrolment rate indicates barriers to the entrance of young people aged 18 to 24 into higher education, due to low conclusion rate in high school. (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Gross tuition and net enrolment rates - Brazil - 2012 – 2021



Source: National Education Plan monitoring panel. INEP, 2023.

Inequalities in expanding access to higher education

The analysis indicates advancements and lingering inequality factors. The Quota Law of 2012 has had a significant impact on the demographic composition of students, particularly within federal public institutions, resulting in greater representation of black and brown students from lower-income backgrounds (Carvalho & Moreira, 2018; Mello & Senkevics, 2020). Overall, the black and brown population among students aged 18 to 24 accounted for 12% in 2014, rising to 17.6% in 2018 and reaching 18.2% in 2024 (Table 1). The consistent representation of this group at similar levels suggests that race or ethnicity continues to play a crucial role in equity policies. White students make up nearly double the percentage (35%) of their black and brown peers (18%); white women still maintain a predominant presence, comprising 40% of this student cohort. Despite this, gender inequalities persist across different fields of study and in the labour market.

Furthermore, income is a significant factor which contributed to inequalities. Between 2018 and 2022, there was a slight increase in the two income brackets, however they remain considerably lower if it compared to the three higher income brackets based on per capita family budget. There is a wide disparity between the poorest and wealthiest individuals attending higher education.

Table 1

Adjusted net rate of the resident population aged 18 to 24 years old, according to selected characteristics – Brazil – 2018, 2022



Income inequality is further evidenced in the comparative analysis across income brackets and attendance at higher education institutions (HEIs), both public and private, if it considered the gross enrolment rate (Table 2). Between 2014 and 2022, there was a slight increase in the participation of students from the two lowest income brackets in public institutions, driven by equitable policies. However, the representation of wealthier students is significantly higher in both public and private.

Table 2

People attending a higher education institution, by administrative sector, according to household income. Brazil - 2014, 2018, 2022



Conclusion

The purpose of a plan is to intervene rationally in a given reality to modify it (Martins, 2010; Matus, 1991). In Brazil, this intervention cannot solely be carried out through the NEP; there is a need for greater political coordination with public budgeting and agreement between governments and society regarding projected targets. In the execution of the 2014 NEP, findings highlight the persistent disparities within Brazilian higher education concerning race, ethnicity, and particularly income: the most economically disadvantaged individuals continue to encounter barriers to entry into undergraduate programs. Addressing these inequalities requires significant commitment and resistance, deserving careful attention in the forthcoming NEP.

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