

**Exploring the Impact of Quality in Higher Education on Student
Engagement: A Study Focused on Critical Success Factors in
Portuguese Institutions**

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Abstract:

This paper addresses a critical issue with global relevance: the relationship between higher education quality and student engagement, focusing on how these factors influence the success of educational institutions. The study aims to assess the engagement perceptions of higher education students and the quality perceptions of their respective institutions in Portugal, comparing these with the key critical success factors defined as quality criteria for accreditation.

The research is grounded in a sample of 1,190 higher education students in Portugal and examines the influence of students' academic engagement across three dimensions on their perception of the concept of quality in higher education. The methodology is based on the Classical Multiple Linear Regression Model, which is used to evaluate the variables that significantly influence perceived quality from the students' perspective.

The findings reveal a positive and significant correlation between variables relevant to influencing perceived quality from the students' perspective, helping to identify the main critical success factors for higher education institutions. These results provide valuable insights that can guide educational policy and quality assurance standards worldwide, making the study highly relevant on a global scale.

Keywords: higher education, engagement, educational, quality, college students

INTRODUCTION

Quality of Higher Education and Student Engagement: The Concept of Student Academic Engagement and Critical Success Factors

Higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals, preparing them to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive and complex job market. In this context, the quality of higher education has gained prominence as a multidimensional construct that not only encompasses academic rigor and excellence but also integrates the overall student experience. The pursuit of educational quality is a persistent concern for governments, institutions, and stakeholders alike, as it directly impacts institutional reputation, student satisfaction, and overall academic success.

The quality of higher education involves a broad spectrum of dimensions, including academic excellence, infrastructure, research output, graduate employability, and student satisfaction (Harvey & Green, 1993; Tavares & Sin, 2021). For higher education institutions (HEIs) to thrive in today's knowledge-driven society, a holistic approach that considers these dimensions is crucial. This requires the implementation of comprehensive policies and practices that target continuous improvement across all aspects of the student experience (de Oliveira & Ferreira, 2022).

A core component of educational quality is student engagement, a concept that has garnered significant attention in academic literature. Student engagement refers to the level of active participation and investment students demonstrate in both academic and extracurricular activities, as well as their involvement within the academic community (Trowler, 2010; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Engaged students are more likely to achieve academic success, develop critical social and leadership skills, and derive a greater sense of fulfillment from their educational experience (Kuh, 2009; Zepke, 2018).

A more specific aspect of student engagement is *Student Academic Engagement*, which focuses on the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive investment students make in their learning process (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Broadbent & Poon, 2019). Academically engaged students exhibit a deep interest in their subjects, actively contribute to discussions, participate in group projects and research, and are driven to achieve their academic goals.

To measure *Student Academic Engagement*, several validated instruments have been developed. One notable tool is the *University Student Engagement Inventory* (USEI), designed by Costa et al. (2014). The USEI assesses various dimensions of student engagement, such as involvement in academic activities, interaction with faculty, participation in extracurricular initiatives, and institutional commitment.

These assessments provide institutions with critical insights into student engagement levels, enabling them to identify strengths and areas for improvement while shaping strategies to foster a more engaging and supportive academic environment (Marôco et al., 2016; Tavares, 2019).

In conclusion, the interrelation between higher education quality and student engagement is fundamental to the overall student experience. By promoting a culture of academic excellence and prioritizing active student engagement, HEIs can enhance both academic and personal outcomes for their students, effectively preparing them for the complexities of the modern world. As organizations such as the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the European Commission (2022) have emphasized, ensuring quality in higher education is paramount. These entities advocate for structured frameworks and quality assurance processes to address evolving educational, professional, and societal needs (Mendes, 2015; European Commission, 2022).

Higher education, as a dynamic sector, not only imparts academic knowledge but also plays a critical role in nurturing student engagement and promoting meaningful learning experiences. Consequently, the concept of educational quality has attracted increasing attention from researchers, educators, and policymakers globally (Tinto, 2017; de Oliveira & Ferreira, 2022). Quality in higher education is a multifaceted construct encompassing academic excellence, institutional resources, student satisfaction, and graduate employability, among other factors. These elements interact synergistically to create an environment conducive to comprehensive student development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Fernandes et al., 2020).

In the Portuguese context, assessing student engagement and the quality of higher education is crucial for ensuring academic excellence and student success. The application of tools like the USEI allows HEIs to gain valuable insights into students' experiences and develop strategic interventions aimed at fostering a more vibrant and engaging academic environment (Tinto, 2017; Tavares & Sin, 2021). Additionally, comparing USEI outcomes with accreditation quality criteria helps institutions identify areas of alignment and potential gaps in meeting established educational standards (Marôco et al., 2016; Fernandes & Almeida, 2019).

To conduct a comprehensive assessment of student engagement, many HEIs have adopted the USEI. This instrument, grounded in the work of Marôco et al. (2016) and Marôco & Garcia-Marques (2013), evaluates critical factors such as participation in academic activities, faculty-student interaction, involvement in extracurricular programs, and overall institutional commitment. The data generated from the USEI serve as a robust foundation for enhancing the quality of the student experience and addressing areas that require targeted improvements (Costa et al., 2014; Broadbent & Poon, 2019).

In summary, the USEI is a valuable tool for assessing student engagement in higher education and is strongly aligned with key constructs of educational quality. By integrating USEI findings with other quality assessment measures, HEIs can create more effective learning environments and offer students a high-quality educational experience.

Therefore, this article aims to evaluate the perceptions of student engagement in higher education and the perceived quality of their respective institutions in Portugal, compared against critical success factors defined as quality criteria for accreditation. The methodology adopted in this research will be elaborated in the subsequent sections, highlighting how these factors influence overall student satisfaction and institutional effectiveness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We used the Classical Multiple Linear Regression Model to meticulously analyze how various dimensions of academic engagement influence students' perceptions of educational quality. This rigorous analytical approach is critical in identifying significant variables that contribute to the understanding of institutional quality from the student perspective.

This research is based in an inquiry divided in three parts (1. characterization of the sample; 2. education quality factors in a total of 16 variables- quality measure and 3. Student's Academic Engagement– USEI in a total of 3 dimensions and 15 questions).

Participants

The methodology is based in a sample of 1190 students of the higher education in Portugal. The sample is representative of the population 443217 students (53,9% female and 46,1 male) dived in 33 public HEI and 66 private HEI that compose the Portuguese official HE system, according to the Portuguese Ministry of Science and Higher Education (2022). We can see the description of the participants in the following table the sample profile in Table 1.

		(%)
Gender	Male	42.86
	Female	56.30
Age	<20	40.3
	21-30	47.1

	31-40	.8
	41-50	10.1
	51-60	1.7
Scientific Field	Education	4.2
	Arts e Humanities	2.5
	Social Sciences, Business and Law	50.4
	Sciences, Maths, IT	14.3
	Engeneering	1.7
	Health	3.4
	Services	5.9
	Unknown	17.6
HEI	Private university	75.6
	Public university	24.4
Study Cycle	BSc/BA	75.6
	Master	19.3
	PhD	1.7
	Other	3.4

Table 1 .*Sample profile*

Instrument

The University Student Engagement Inventory (USEI) was originally developed by Marôco, Campos, and Fredricks in 2016 as a self-report measure specifically designed for higher education students. It was based on the theoretical framework of the School Engagement Measure (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2004), which was originally intended to assess the school engagement of secondary education students. The USEI is an adaptation of this earlier measure, tailored to the university context through a rigorous process that involved both theoretical and empirical refinements (Marôco et al., 2016; Marôco & Garcia-Marques, 2013). The USEI was first presented to the international scientific community in 2014 at the 10th National Congress of Health Psychology.

The inventory comprises 15 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Never" to "Always." It measures three key dimensions of student engagement: Academic Engagement, Cognitive Engagement, and Emotional Engagement, with each subscale containing 5 items. These dimensions provide a comprehensive assessment of the various facets of student involvement, reflecting both behavioral and emotional components of engagement in the university setting.

The development of the USEI involved multiple stages, rooted in the conceptual model of Fredericks et al. (2004). The process began with a focus group study involving 10 undergraduate students from diverse fields, including social sciences, health, and engineering. The focus group discussions lasted approximately two hours and aimed to capture students' conceptualizations of academic engagement. Participants were asked to discuss three guiding questions: (1) "How would you define a student who is engaged with their coursework and university?" (2) "What daily practices do you adopt to succeed in your coursework?" and (3) "What academic activities, related to your university experience, do you participate in or wish to participate in outside the classroom?" The group consisted of six female and four male students, with an average age of 21 years, all in their fifth semester of study.

Based on the insights gathered from the focus group, 17 new items were developed to address specific aspects of engagement within the higher education context. These items were categorized into the three dimensions of the inventory according to their content. In addition, the original 15 items from the adapted School Engagement Measure (Fredericks et al., 2004) were included after obtaining the necessary permissions. This initial version of the USEI consisted of 32 items rated on a Likert scale from 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Always").

A pilot study was then conducted with a sample of 313 higher education students to evaluate the sensitivity, reliability, and factorial validity of the items. Through this analysis, items that demonstrated strong content validity and psychometric properties were retained, resulting in the final 15-item format of the USEI. The reduction to 15 items was based on rigorous statistical analysis aimed at optimizing the instrument's reliability and validity while ensuring that it remained concise and easy to administer.

The decision to add new items beyond those originally adapted from Fredericks et al. (2004) was driven by the recognition that higher education contexts present unique challenges and opportunities for engagement that are not fully captured by measures designed for secondary education. These additions, which will be discussed in greater detail in the theoretical framework of this chapter, sought to address gaps related to the academic and social dynamics specific to university students.

Overall, the USEI has proven to be a valuable tool for assessing student engagement within higher education, offering a nuanced understanding of how students interact with their academic environment. The final 15-item version, as presented in Table 2, represents a balance between comprehensive coverage of engagement dimensions and practical applicability in diverse educational settings.

Behavioral Engagement

E1 In general, I pay attention in class.

E2 I follow the school rules.

E3 I usually do my homework on time.

E4 When in doubt, I ask questions and get involved in classroom debates.

E5 I usually actively participate in group work.

Emotional Engagement

E6 I feel unfulfilled in this school.

E7 I feel enthusiastic about the work at school.

E8 I like being at school.

E9 I am interested in school work.

E10 My classroom is an interesting place to be.

Cognitive Engagement

E11 When I read a book, I question myself to make sure I understand the subject I am reading.

E12 I talk to other people outside the school about the subjects I learn in class.

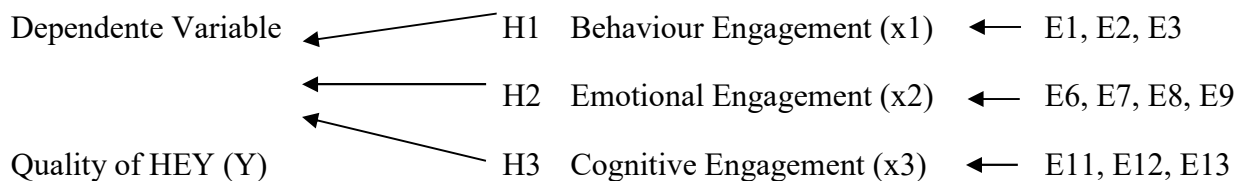
E13 If I don't understand the meaning of a word, I try to solve the problem, for example, by looking up a dictionary or asking someone else.

E14 I try to integrate the acquired knowledge to solve new problems.

E15 I try to integrate subjects from different subjects into my general knowledge.

Table 2. 15- item USEI format

The following Figure 1 shows the model used in the present research:


Figure 1. Research Model

In the present study, the *USEI* must present evidence of factorial validity (internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity), measure invariance between genders and areas of study and predictive validity for the quality of HEIs in a larger sample of university students from mainland Portugal and autonomous regions.

Procedures

Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted through an open online platform specifically designed for this study. The platform was accessible from April to September 2022 and included the University Student Engagement Inventory (USEI) instrument alongside questions regarding students' perceptions of the quality of their higher education institutions (HEIs). The goal was to gather comprehensive data on how students evaluate both their engagement and the quality of their academic experiences.

Methodology and Data Analysis

For the data analysis, this study employed the Classical Multiple Linear Regression Model methodology, which is well-suited for examining the relationships between multiple independent variables and a single dependent variable. This approach allowed us to identify which factors significantly influence the perceived quality of HEIs from the student's perspective.

The research design was based on a structured survey divided into two main sections. The first section focused on characterizing the sample, while the second explored factors related to educational quality. In total, sixteen independent variables were considered, including aspects such as the study plan, institutional reputation, faculty qualifications, tuition cost, campus facilities, opportunities for socialization, employability prospects, geographic location, university size, scientific research output, diversity of academic programs, academic services, sports and recreational activities, and faculty-student interaction. These factors were analyzed to determine their impact on the dependent variable, which was defined as the perceived quality of the HEI.

In addition, the core of this study revolves around academic engagement as measured by the USEI (Costa et al., 2014), which assesses three dimensions of engagement: Emotional Engagement (5 items), Cognitive Engagement (5 items), and Behavioral Engagement (5 items). Each dimension provides a distinct perspective on how students interact with their learning environment, ranging from emotional investment in academic activities to cognitive strategies and actual behaviors within the university setting.

Variables and Regression Analysis

In the regression model, the dependent variable is the perceived quality of the HEI (Y). The independent variables included academic engagement (X1), behavioral engagement (X2), and emotional engagement (X3). By considering these dimensions as explanatory factors, the study aimed to determine which types of engagement most strongly predict students' perceptions of institutional quality.

The use of these specific engagement dimensions aligns with the broader literature on student engagement and quality assurance in higher education (Marôco et al., 2016; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Emotional engagement refers to the affective connection students feel toward their studies, while cognitive engagement captures the extent to which students are intellectually invested in their learning tasks. Behavioral engagement, on the other hand, is characterized by students' participation in academic and extracurricular activities, which has been shown to correlate with academic success and institutional loyalty.

Results and Discussion

After analyzing the data, the results regarding the academic engagement and quality instruments reveal that, across all dimensions, the mean scores are above the midpoint of the Likert scale, which ranges from one to five points. This suggests a generally positive perception of both engagement and quality among the surveyed students. However, the emotional engagement dimension shows slightly lower mean values (though still above the midpoint) compared to the behavioral and cognitive dimensions. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that emotional engagement is often more challenging for students to maintain consistently (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Zepke, 2018).

The variability in responses covers the full range of the Likert scale (1-5) in most cases, except for certain items: E2 and E5 (behavioral engagement), where responses ranged between 3 and 5 and 2 and 5, respectively, and E13 and E15 (cognitive engagement), which ranged between 2 and 5. These narrower response ranges in specific items suggest that while students generally exhibit consistent behavioral and cognitive engagement, there may be more nuanced or complex factors influencing emotional engagement that merit further exploration.

Regarding the quality assessment instrument, the responses also show a tendency toward higher scores, again indicating a generally favorable perception of institutional quality. The responses consistently varied within the full range of the Likert scale, suggesting diverse perspectives among students on the factors contributing to quality.

Analysis of Key Variables and Model

In this study, the Classical Simple Linear Regression Model was initially used to identify which variables significantly influence perceived quality from the student's perspective. This approach allows for an understanding of the critical success factors that students consider important in defining institutional quality, which can also serve as potential accreditation criteria for higher education institutions (HEIs). Recent studies emphasize the growing importance of incorporating student feedback into quality standards and accreditation processes (de Oliveira & Ferreira, 2022; European Commission, 2022).

To build the quality predictor model, we first analyzed the correlations between the dimensions of academic engagement and the dependent variable, which was defined as: "How would you rate your satisfaction with the overall quality of the institution where you study?" A correlation threshold of $r = .30$ or higher was set as the criterion for including a dimension in the regression model. Additionally, to avoid multicollinearity, we ensured that no correlations between the engagement dimensions exceeded $r = .80$ (Pallant, 2020). This rigorous approach minimizes the risk of multicollinearity, which could distort the regression results and lead to unreliable conclusions.

The multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using the "enter" method, which allows all selected variables to be introduced simultaneously into the model. The results, as displayed in Table 3, indicate the predictor model for perceived quality.

Predictor Model			
Variables	β standard	t	p
Emotional academic engagement	.492	3.488	.001
Engagement (total)	-.107	-.763	.447
R^2	.169		
R^2 adjusted	.154		
F	11.769		.001

Table 3. *Predictor Model for Quality*

Model Implications and Interpretation

The findings indicate that emotional engagement is a particularly strong predictor of quality, suggesting that HEIs should prioritize strategies that enhance students'

emotional connection to their academic experience. This could include fostering supportive relationships between students and faculty, creating a positive and inclusive campus environment, and providing resources that address students' emotional and psychological needs.

The overall academic engagement score also contributes to predicting quality, reinforcing the idea that engagement in various forms—emotional, behavioral, and cognitive—collectively impacts students' perceptions of institutional quality. The positive associations across all dimensions imply that efforts to boost academic engagement in any area are likely to have beneficial effects on students' satisfaction and perceptions of their institution's quality.

Interpretation of Findings

The regression analysis results highlight that behavioral and cognitive engagement are significant predictors of perceived institutional quality, while emotional engagement, despite its importance, shows a weaker influence in the model. This aligns with the understanding that tangible aspects of engagement, such as consistent academic behaviors and cognitive involvement, have a more direct impact on students' perceptions of educational quality (Tavares & Sin, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that students prioritize elements like faculty interaction, campus resources, and academic services in their assessment of quality. This reinforces the importance of a holistic approach to quality enhancement in HEIs, which not only focuses on academic excellence but also on creating supportive and resource-rich environments that promote sustained engagement (Broadbent & Poon, 2019).

The analysis reveals that emotional academic engagement and the total academic engagement score are significant predictors of perceived quality in higher education institutions (HEIs). Specifically, these two predictor variables together account for 15.4% of the variance in the perceived quality of the institution. This model is statistically significant, as evidenced by $[F(2, 116) = 11.769, p \leq .001]$, indicating that the predictors collectively contribute to understanding the variation in quality perceptions.

Individual Contributions of Predictor Variables

When examining the predictor variables individually, it is evident that emotional academic engagement plays a unique and substantial role in predicting perceived quality. This variable alone explains 49.2% of the variance in perceived quality,

highlighting its significant impact. The positive and statistically significant relationship between emotional engagement and quality suggests that higher levels of emotional investment in academic activities are associated with more favorable perceptions of the institution's overall quality. This finding underscores the importance of emotional engagement in fostering student satisfaction and enhancing the quality of the educational experience (Tavares & Sin, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2020).

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency

In addition to examining predictive variables, we also assessed the descriptive statistics and internal consistency of the academic engagement and quality instruments. The internal consistency, measured by Cronbach's alpha, indicates the reliability of the instruments used. Table 4 provides detailed descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha values for the "Academic Engagement" and "Quality" scales, demonstrating robust internal consistency and reliability for these measures.

Instruments/dimensions		Mín	Max	Mean	SD	A
Academic engagement						
Behavioral engagement	E1	1	5	4.19	.805	
	E2	3	5	4.69	.564	
	E3	1	5	4.29	.924	
	E4	1	5	3.77	1.20	
	E5	2	5	4.52	.723	
Total (dimension)		3	5	4.29	.60	.727
Emotional engagement	E6	1	5	2.97	1.36	
	E7	1	5	3.52	1.11	
	E8	1	5	3.76	1.11	
	E9	1	5	3.79	1.06	
	E10	1	5	3.45	1.10	
Total (dimension)		1.4	5	3.50	.77	.70
Cognitive engagement	E11	1	5	3.93	1.10	
	E12	1	5	3.99	1.04	
	E13	2	5	4.39	.749	
	E14	1	5	4.29	.835	
	E15	2	5	4.42	.731	
Total (dimension)		2.4	5	4.20	.665	.789

Quality (total)	1	5	3.71	.708	.915
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Table 4. Descriptive and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of the instruments "Academic Engagement and Quality"

The correlations that were the basis of the decision can be analyzed in Table 5 in which it is possible to verify that quality is positively, moderately and significantly associated with the emotional dimension of academic engagement, suggesting that the greater the engagement in this dimension, the greater the perception of quality relative to the institution. With the dimension of behavioral engagement, the association found, although positive and statistically significant, is weak and with the cognitive dimension no relationship was found. With the total score of academic engagement, the association is positive, weak and statistically significant, suggesting the same previous reading of the results.

Dimensions					
Quality	-				
Engagement (total)	$r=.285^{(**)}$	-			
Behaviour Engagement	$r=.206^{(**)}$	$r=.844^{(**)}$	-		
Emotional Engagement	$r=.406^{(**)}$	$r=.799^{(**)}$	$r=.472^{(**)}$	-	
Cognitive Engagement	n.s.	$r=.840^{(**)}$	$r=.686^{(**)}$	$r=0,53^{(**)}$	-
	Quality	Engagement (total)	Behaviour Engagement	Emotional Engagement	Cognitive Involvement

Note. $(**)$ $p \leq .01$ n.s. = non significative.

Table 5

Correlation coefficients between quality «How would you rate your satisfaction with the general quality of the institution where you study?» and the dimensions of academic engagement

Based on these assumptions, the following variables could be included in the model: emotional academic engagement and total score engagement. In the case of the dimension of the total score of academic engagement, despite the association not being .30, as it is a very close value, we chose to include it in the model. We also observed there were no statistically significant differences in the dimensions of academic engagement and quality according to gender or age.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the interconnectedness between the quality of higher education and student engagement, emphasizing how these constructs significantly influence students' academic experiences and outcomes. The findings reinforce the importance of fostering a culture of academic excellence and active student participation within higher education institutions (HEIs). Institutions that prioritize these elements are better positioned to enhance student satisfaction, promote successful learning experiences, and improve overall institutional quality (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tavares & Sin, 2021).

The research reveals that factors such as student engagement, academic support, and institutional commitment are critical for defining the success and quality of HEIs (Fernandes et al., 2020). The positive correlation between student engagement and educational quality suggests that institutions should invest in strategies that promote both academic and extracurricular engagement, thereby creating an environment conducive to holistic student development (Broadbent & Poon, 2019).

The use of the University Student Engagement Inventory (USEI) provided valuable insights into different dimensions of student engagement, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of how engagement levels affect the perception of educational quality (Marôco et al., 2016). By aligning these findings with the critical success factors required for accreditation, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the quality standards that should guide HEIs (European Commission, 2022).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in the context of Portuguese higher education institutions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Future research could expand the scope by exploring similar analyses in different countries or regions to identify whether the same factors hold relevance in diverse educational settings (Tavares, 2019).

Another limitation lies in the cross-sectional design of the study, which captures student engagement and perceptions of quality at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies would provide a more nuanced understanding of how student engagement evolves throughout their academic journey and how it impacts long-term educational outcomes (Zepke, 2018).

Additionally, while the USEI was a useful tool for measuring engagement, further research could explore the integration of qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to gain deeper insights into students' subjective experiences and motivations (Fernandes & Almeida, 2019). Such approaches could enrich the quantitative findings and provide more comprehensive recommendations for HEIs.

Future research could also investigate the impact of technological advancements and digital learning environments on student engagement and educational quality. Given the growing importance of online education, understanding how these factors influence student experiences will be critical for developing effective engagement strategies in increasingly digital learning contexts (de Oliveira & Ferreira, 2022).

Finally, the study suggests that further exploration is needed to examine how specific institutional policies and practices contribute to or hinder student engagement and educational quality. Investigating the role of leadership, faculty development, and resource allocation could yield actionable insights for HEIs aiming to improve their performance in these areas (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Final Remarks

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant role that student engagement plays in enhancing the quality of higher education. By focusing on both academic excellence and active engagement, HEIs can foster a more enriching educational environment that better prepares students for academic success and future professional challenges (Tavares & Sin, 2021). As higher education continues to evolve, integrating these insights into institutional practices and policy development will be essential for maintaining and improving educational quality on a global scale.

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