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Higher Education at a Crossroads: Towards 2030

The accelerated growth in demand for access to higher education in recent decades, particularly in the Latin American and Caribbean region, is a clear indication of this level's economic and social value. This point was made in the recently launched UNESCO, UNICEF and ECLAC Report [Education in Latin America and the Caribbean at a Crossroads - The SDG4-Education 2030 Regional Monitoring Report](#).

Chapter 5: 'Higher Education in SDG4-Education 2030', led by the [UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean \(IESALC\)](#), provides an overview of the main challenges, trends, and public policy mechanisms managed by governments in the region since the beginning of the century.

One of the pillars of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) is the expansion of opportunities for access to higher education for the entire population. In this regard, Latin American states have made significant efforts to democratize access through various policies.

On the supply side, countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Uruguay have opted to consolidate and create new public higher education institutions to meet the growing demand. In addition to expanding public offerings, some countries have promoted important measures such as direct financing for students.

A key point in the most recent reforms in Chile and Mexico has been the gradual implementation of free higher education while countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela already have consolidated policies for universal free education. Chapter 5 of the Report addresses regional initiatives that promote equitable access for minority and most vulnerable populations. These policies include measures such as social and ethnic-racial quotas in Brazil's federal universities and the creation of intercultural universities aimed at promoting access to forms and content specific to indigenous peoples.

One of the major trends in terms of structural reforms has been the adoption of policies targeting the strengthening of the State's stewardship of national higher education systems. To achieve this objective, specialized political and administrative structures were created in the sector, accompanied by increases in public spending during certain periods.

To date, nine countries in the region (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay) have set up agencies within their ministries for the sole purpose of managing their higher education systems, while others, such as Cuba and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, opted for the creation of ministries with an exclusive higher education mandate.

Furthermore, educational quality assurance, institutional accreditation, and continuous improvement processes have become priority areas of public policy in recent years. Almost all countries, except for the Plurinational State of Bolivia and the Caribbean nations, elected to use a collegial intervention formula and have implemented autonomous agencies to ensure the provision of an educational service with quality standards. The exponential increase in demand at the beginning of this century led, in many cases, to an uncontrolled growth that could not be covered by public supply and opened the door to the commercialization of higher education systems.

It is precisely in this context that quality assurance policies played a fundamental role in getting rid of underqualified educational offerings, thereby protecting students' right to quality education. In some cases, for example Peru, where the licensing process concluded in 2020, more than one third of the universities that used to operate received a license denial, thus reflecting the importance of including quality on the public agenda.

Finally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education systems cannot be overlooked. While the distance education modality produced significant

growth prior to the pandemic – 4.3 million students in 2017 – the health crisis forced a rapid transition to online environments to ensure the continuity of educational service.

However, it is still uncertain to what extent the windows of opportunity generated by COVID-19 will eventually be exploited since this depends on determining what public support institutions can count on to undertake reforms that optimize the use of technology and develop the pedagogical skills of teachers in this modality.

UNESCO has promoted an international consensus that higher education should be seen as a public and social good. Despite the many challenges in this regard, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have implemented public policies that reflect progress in this direction. Chapter 5 of the UNESCO, UNICEF, and ECLAC Report reinforces the concept of higher education as a right and offers an overview of the main actions taken at the regional level.

Higher education

Higher education in SDG4, Education 2030

Higher education includes the entire range of education provided after secondary education and encompasses academic programs and professional training, including research, that is offered by institutions such as universities that are recognized by national authorities as being part of the higher education sector (UNESCO, 1998). The rapid growth in demand for higher education across the globe, and in the Latin American and Caribbean region specifically, is indicative of the sector's tremendous economic and social value to individuals and to governments, which have been investing in universal access to education at levels preceding higher education. The increased social and economic wellbeing that higher education offers is apparent in the salary differences between those possessing post-secondary qualifications and those who managed only to complete secondary education (Busso *et al.*, 2017).

In fact, the average differences are much higher in the LAC region than in more developed countries, surpassing 200% in countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico, compared to the average of 150% among OECD countries (OECD, 2021). However, beyond the personal return from the perspective of public intervention, the sector offers strategic benefits to the nation for its capacity to develop highly qualified human capital in the service of society, private enterprise, and the State. It also generates new knowledge and encourages innovation and social and economic stimulation in social justice contexts, as proposed in the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda.

Unlike the global education agendas that preceded them, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA), SDG4 takes as one of its core targets expanding access to higher education to the entire population (UNESCO, 2016a). The concept of lifelong learning includes concern for ensuring greater and equitable access to this educational stage and more opportunities for quality learning. To this end, SDG4 generates a specific monitoring framework, expressed in target 4.3, and includes it as a high priority in its policy recommendations (UNESCO, 2016a).

With its evident reported benefits, the sector acts as a catalyst for public and private actions aimed at achieving equal educational opportunities from a social justice perspective. International law had already included higher education as part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); later, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1966) affirmed that "Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity." While this provision makes it an absolute obligation for States not to discriminate, it does not demand that access to higher education be universalized, leaving the door open to systems with high rates of private provision, the high economic costs of which make it accessible only to a limited, privileged portion of the population (Schendel and McCowan, 2016).

The most common rationale for this is that access should be merit-based, and so many people, due to their lack of dedication or natural talent, are not able to take advantage of the opportunities inherent to higher education. However, this rationale ignores the fact that determinants to access and success in higher education develop long before students reach this level, originating in the disparate quality of primary and secondary education systems, as well as in pre-existing social and economic inequalities. In fact, on average in the region, young people from high-income families are seven times more likely to access higher education than those from families in the lowest-income quintile, and in some Central American countries the former can be 18 times more likely (Busso *et al.*, 2017). It is vitally important to note, however, that those inequalities seem to have worsened in recent years owing to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, the rationale also maintains an approach to public expenditure on higher education that is focused, if not on restricting access, then at least on not expanding it.

UNESCO has encouraged international consensus on the matter, as reflected in the Regional Conferences on Higher Education (UNESCO IESALC, 2018), imparting guidelines to ensure that, first of all, higher education is seen as a public social good; second, that the right to higher education be an integral part of the universal right to education; third, that States play a central role in

guaranteeing the exercise of that right in a framework of equal opportunities; and last, specifically in the case of universities—given their role as institutions that are essentially oriented toward research and the production and transmission of scientific knowledge—that their institutional autonomy should be guaranteed in a framework of academic freedom.

The tension between the robust tradition of institutional autonomy in the region—now enshrined in the so-called “Scream of Córdoba” (1918)—and State intervention, has made higher education one of the most complex areas to manage politically, and until recently the result has been a sector with weak governance and high levels of social injustice (Mendoza, 2020). However, what characterizes higher education in the region above all is the heterogeneity of policies related to it, which has created a certain degree of polarization among countries (Fernández and Pérez, 2016). In fact, even within the same country one can sometimes find both a constitutionally framed political orientation (defense of university autonomy) and its opposite enacted in legislation (State representation predominates in university governance authorities). This brings into relief the recurring, and perhaps inevitable, tension between governments and higher education institutions, as well as between political and regulatory control and academic and institutional autonomy.

In this context, based on comparative information available, the monitoring of higher education proposed in this chapter focuses on analyzing regional and national trends in access to higher education based on gross enrollment rates. The chapter also introduces some complementary indicators to characterize this educational level, and delves deeper into some measurements that reflect the unequal access to it.

Entry, completion and equity in higher education

This educational stage encompasses programs that usually focus on students who have completed secondary education and are seeking to acquire some kind of higher education certification. It includes diverse types of education, approaches and modalities (academic or professional; technical, artistic, or pedagogical; in-person or remote learning, etc.), and although this learning occurs most commonly in universities, higher education may also be provided by technology institutes, professional training institutes, and others (UNESCO, 1998).

SDG indicator 4.3.2, “Gross enrolment ratio,” is the most widely used around the world to monitor access to higher education. This rate is an approximate measure of access that establishes the ratio of the total number of enrolled students as a percentage of the population in the theoretical age group;¹ as such, it does not strictly represent the percentage of the population that accesses higher education. The information available shows that in the past 20 years, access has risen significantly. The gross ratio increased from 19% to 38% at the global level, with the Latin American and Caribbean region showing the second highest growth, after East and Southeast Asia.²

This growth, however, has occurred unequally among countries, and the gaps are tending to increase. A recent study by UNESCO’s International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (*Instituto Internacional de la UNESCO para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe*, IESALC) shows that in recent decades, middle- to high-income countries increased their participation rates more, while higher education rates in lower-income countries have risen more slowly. Poverty, crises and emergencies, high enrollment fees, entrance exams, limited geographic mobility and discrimination are the central barriers that limit marginalized communities’ access to higher education (UNESCO IESALC, 2020b).

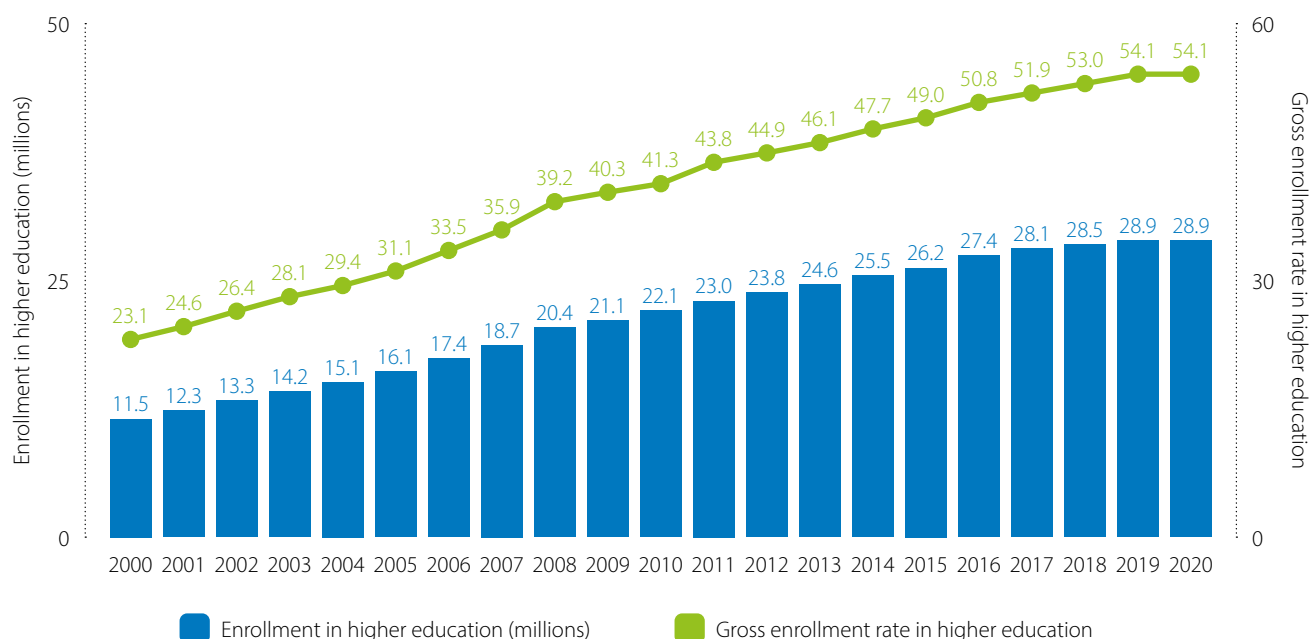
Figure 1 shows a constant rise in the rate of access to higher education of about two percentage points per year. Close to 17 million students entered higher education during this period. This growth began to slow down in the 2015-2020 period, and over the past two years the indicator has remained static. This is a warning bell that will need to be monitored, to determine to what extent it is signaling a change in the trend.

In the final year of the period, 28.9 million young people and adults attended higher education. Of them, 10% attended ISCED 5 (short-cycle tertiary education), 84% attended ISCED 6 (Bachelor’s degree or equivalent tertiary education level), 5% were in ISCED 7 (Master’s degree or equivalent tertiary education level), and 1% attended ISCED 8 (doctoral or equivalent education level).

¹ While higher education has no strictly defined age range, as there is no upper limit for entry, for the purpose of constructing a comparable indicator the theoretical population of youth in the age group corresponding to the five years immediately following completion of upper secondary education is used (UIS, 2018b).

² Estimates from the UIS database.

Figure 1. Gross enrolment ratio (SDG indicator 4.3.2) and total enrolment for tertiary education (millions of people). Latin America and the Caribbean. 2000-2020



Data source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at <https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5> (accessed 1 December 2021).

When broken down by country (Figure 2) the data show that Southern Cone countries tend to have higher levels of access to higher education than other countries in the region, while Central American and Caribbean countries tend to have the lowest rate of access.

Over the past five years, the overall trend shows some improvement, with negative or no change reported in only a few cases. What is concerning behavior is the fact that countries with higher levels of access are also those where access is increasing faster: the five countries with the highest higher education enrollment rate—excluding Uruguay, which shows exceptionally high growth—increased by 8% on average from 2015 to 2020, while in the five lowest scoring countries, the indicator grew by only one percentage point—except for the British Virgin Islands, where the indicator dropped dramatically. If this trend is not reversed, the inequalities among countries will become increasingly marked. For countries that have information for 2010, this trend has been sustained over time: opportunities for access increase more in countries where higher education is already well developed.

No direct relationship was observed between the population's level of access to higher education and the existence of public education provision: in some countries, including Argentina and Uruguay, the majority of students are enrolled in public institutions

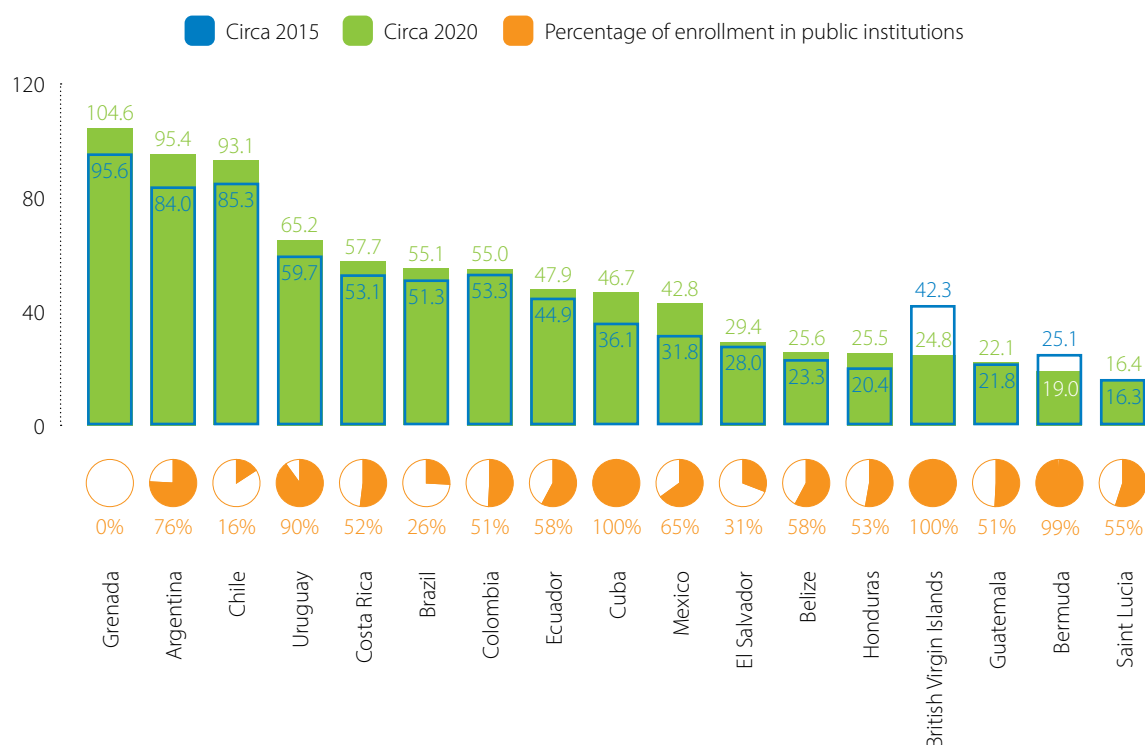
and access is high, while in other countries like Peru and Chile, rates are also high, but higher education provision is intensely privatized.

Moreover, the higher participation in public higher education in some countries does not necessarily mean that access to it is free. Some public universities charge enrollment or tuition fees, or have other direct costs, and these constitute one of the main barriers to guaranteeing equitable access (UNESCO IESALC, 2020b). According to recent data, in the region more than 50% of higher education enrollment is financed by students' families themselves (Bustamante Chán, Passailaigue Baquerizo and Silva Gómez, 2021).

In analyzing the trends in participation in private higher education for the 17 countries that have consistent, comprehensive information for the 2010-2020 period, it can be observed that in the first half of the decade, enrollment in private institutions increased (from 52.2% to 54.3% between 2010 and 2015), then in the second half the indicator flattened out somewhat (decreasing slightly to 54.1%).³ It should be noted that recent studies in the region reveal the existence of different quality circuits in higher education, which is manifested in both public and private institutions. In both realms,

³ Estimates from the UIS database.

Figure 2. Gross enrolment rate for tertiary education (SDG indicator 4.3.2) for 2015-2020 and percentage of enrolment in public institutions as of 2020. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean



Note: For the gross enrollment indicator, data from 2020 was used for the years circa 2020, except for Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, the British Virgin Islands, Mexico and Uruguay (2019), and Bermuda, El Salvador and Grenada (2018). For the years circa 2015, values from that year were used. In the indicator showing the percentage enrollment in public institutions, information from 2019 was used, except for Belize and Saint Lucia (2020), Grenada and El Salvador (2018), Cuba, the British Virgin Islands and Bermuda (2015).

Data source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at <https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5> (accessed 1 December 2021).

these circuits tend to lead to pathways for the “elite” and those for “the masses” (Ezcurra, 2020).

To complement access data, it is also important to analyze the graduation rates of those who enroll in higher education. The relationship between access, retention, and progression towards a qualification is crucial for characterizing the progress countries make towards making the right to higher education universal.

Graduation rates enable a representation of the final outcome of the educational process that occurs within higher education institutions. It represents the ratio of the total number of graduates from degree programs (ISCED 6 and 7) as a percentage of the population in the theoretical graduation age, considering the length of the most common degree program.

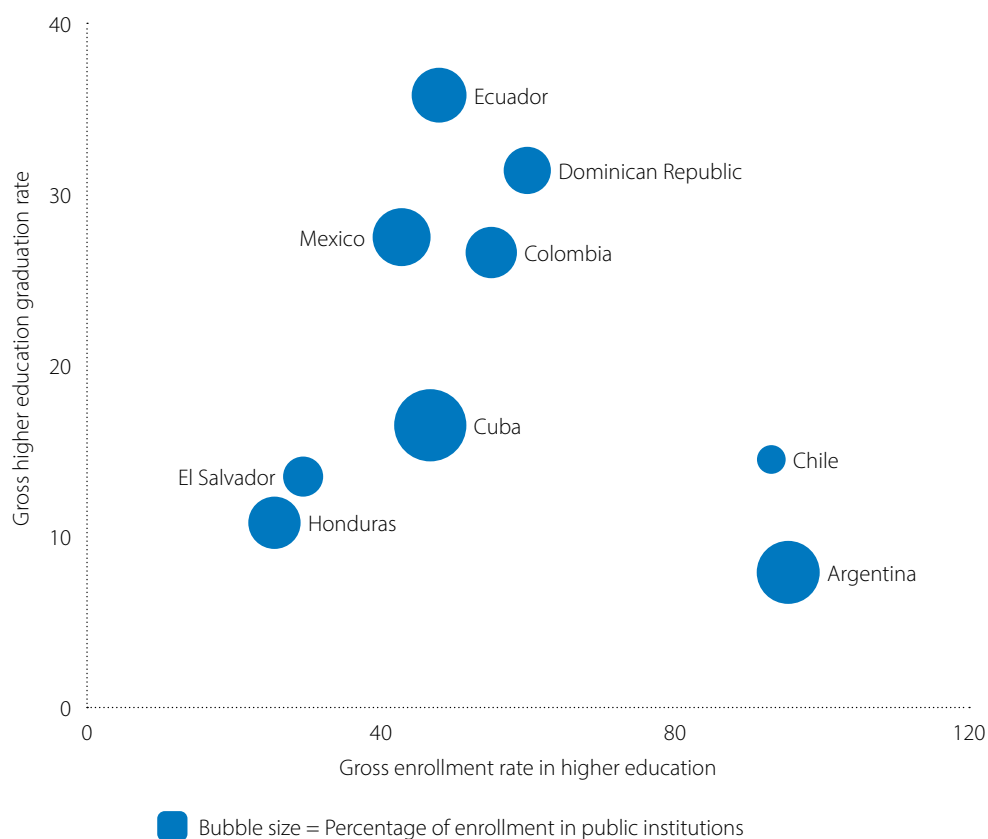
Although only a small group of countries has information about this aspect, analyzing that information does yield some observations. There is no clear relationship between access to and graduation from higher education (Figure 3): there are countries

with intermediate levels of access, but high graduation rates, and also others with high levels of access that do not lead to higher graduation rates. The latter group includes countries with very high dropout levels. As countries advance towards widespread access to higher education, inequities are manifested more frequently within levels, expressed in higher dropout rates and difficulties associated with pathways, and monitoring retention and completion becomes increasingly important.

A key message of the report “Towards universal access to higher education: International trends,” published by IESALC, is that higher education institutions must develop strategies to reduce the gap between enrollment and graduation, especially among disadvantaged groups, and strengthen data collection on completion rates to provide a clearer picture of retention (UNESCO IESALC, 2020b).

Another aspect relevant for the analysis is the distribution of enrollment among educational fields.

Figure 3. Gross enrolment rate for tertiary education (SDG indicator 4.3.2), gross rate of graduation from higher education and percentage of enrolment in public institutions. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Circa 2020



Note: For years circa 2020, 2019 data were used, except for Cuba, Ecuador and El Salvador (2018), and for Mexico and the Dominican Republic (2017).
 Data source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at <https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5> (accessed 1 December 2021).

Figure 4 shows these data, along with information about the relative presence of women in each field. Approximately one-quarter of students who attend higher education register in business and law programs, and 14%-16% in health and welfare, engineering, industry and construction, and education programs, in most countries. Between 2015 and 2018, participation increased slightly in some groups of programs with relatively lower weighting in enrollment, including service programs (1.3 points), and social sciences, journalism and information (0.9 points).

Data on the relative participation of women enables the identification of orientations with more unequal access in regard to gender: those related to information and communication technologies, engineering, industry and construction, have lower female enrollment. In contrast, the programs associated most with care giving roles (health, welfare and education) and social sciences, display a higher presence of women.

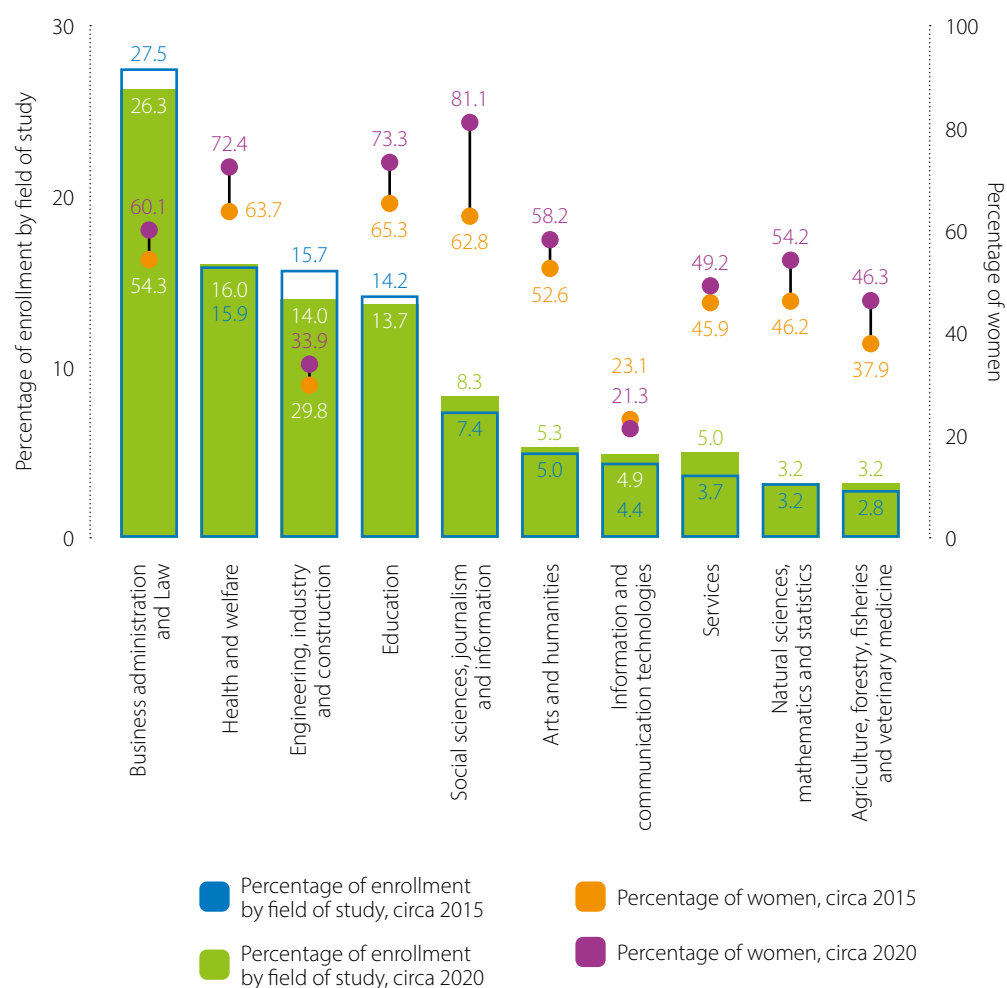
From 2015 to 2019 there was an observable overall increase in women’s participation in the different

orientations. This indicator increased less in programs where women participated less, which indicates that unequal access for women is not only persistent, but has also deepened. The close to 20-point increase in women’s participation in social science programs is striking. By 2020, 81% of students enrolling in these programs were women.

In this regard, it is important to analyze the overall trends in women’s enrollment. Figure 1 shows a sustained increase in the enrollment rate, while the disaggregated rates for women and men presented in Figure 5 show that this rise has been dissimilar in the two groups. Throughout the past 20 years there has been an evident increase in women’s participation in higher education.

While in 2000 the indicator displayed a high level of parity between the two genders, with a difference of just 3.8 percentage points, this difference has widened gradually over the period. Between 2000 and 2020, women’s enrollment rate has grown by 36.6%, and men’s by 25.6%.

Figure 4. Percentage of enrollment in higher education by educational field and percentage of women enrolled in each field. Latin American countries. Circa 2015-2020



Note: The values are simple averages of the countries with information available for the period. Information from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Mexico, Panama and Uruguay was used. The circa 2015 data correspond to 2015, except for Cuba and Uruguay (2016). The circa 2020 data correspond to 2019, except for Argentina (2018). The category “unknown or unspecified fields of education,” which some countries present and which represents less than 0.5%, is excluded.

Data source: Ibero-American Network of Higher Education Indicators (Red Iberoamericana de Indicadores de Educación Superior, Red INDICES), available at <http://www.redindices.org/indicadores-comparativos/indicadores-comparativos-estudiantes> (accessed 1 December 2021).

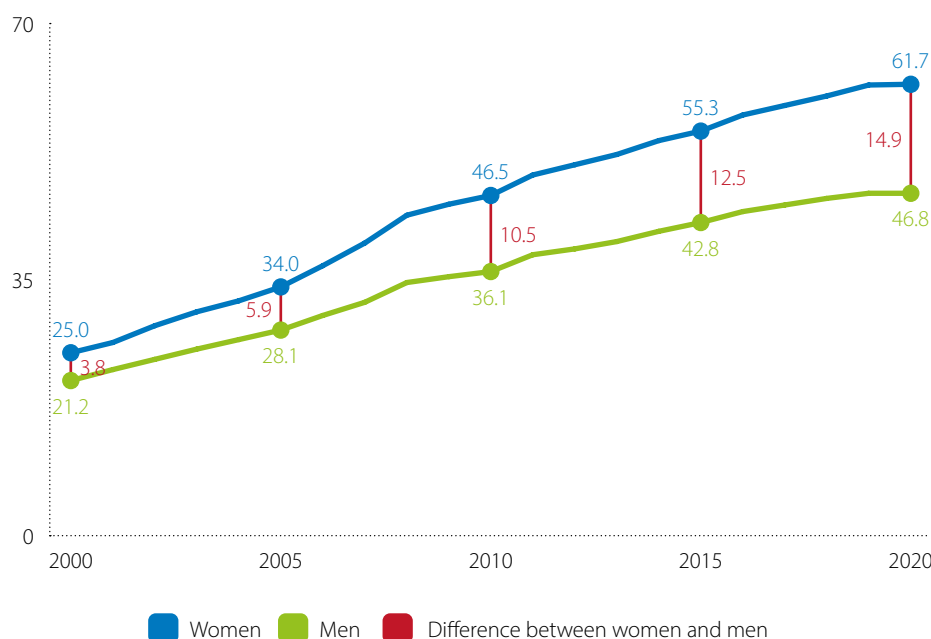
It is estimated that 128 women attend tertiary education in the region for every 100 men. The data do not show any signs that this trend will slow down in the coming years. On the contrary, the gap is increasing steadily.

One of the factors most closely linked with opportunities for access to tertiary education is socioeconomic level. Data from countries in the region (Figure 6) show that access to this educational level benefits primarily middle- and high-income segments of the population, while the lower-income segment has less access.

The gross enrollment rate for 2019 was 23.2% for the low-income population, considering the simple

average among countries with information available, and 136.5% for the highest-income quintile. Given the nature of the indicator—which compares enrollment in tertiary education with the population in the age bracket spanning the five years following the theoretical secondary education graduation age—, these percentages indicate that the higher income population has much greater access to higher education, while only one in four young people in the lowest income bracket will access this stage. This gap has widened dramatically in recent years, from an 80-point spread in 2000 to 113 points in 2019.

Uruguay and the Dominican Republic, and to a lesser extent Chile and Argentina, display the smallest gaps

Figure 5. Gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education by sex. Latin America and the Caribbean. 2000-2020.

Data source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at <https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5> (accessed 1 December 2021).

in access. Even so, the gaps are very marked in all cases: even where the difference is very low, the gross enrollment rate in the lowest-income quintile is less than half that of the highest-income quintile.

This exclusion is partly associated with low levels of secondary education completion, which limits young people from accessing higher studies. Unless education systems manage to reverse the profound inequalities in access to upper secondary certification, higher education will remain inaccessible to broad segments of the population.

However, this alone does not entirely explain the gaps observed. Many young people from low-middle and low-income segments who complete secondary education do not continue on to tertiary education, or in some cases they do, but soon they drop out. This reinforces the segregation among levels and reflects the cumulative inequalities that affect them throughout their educational pathways.

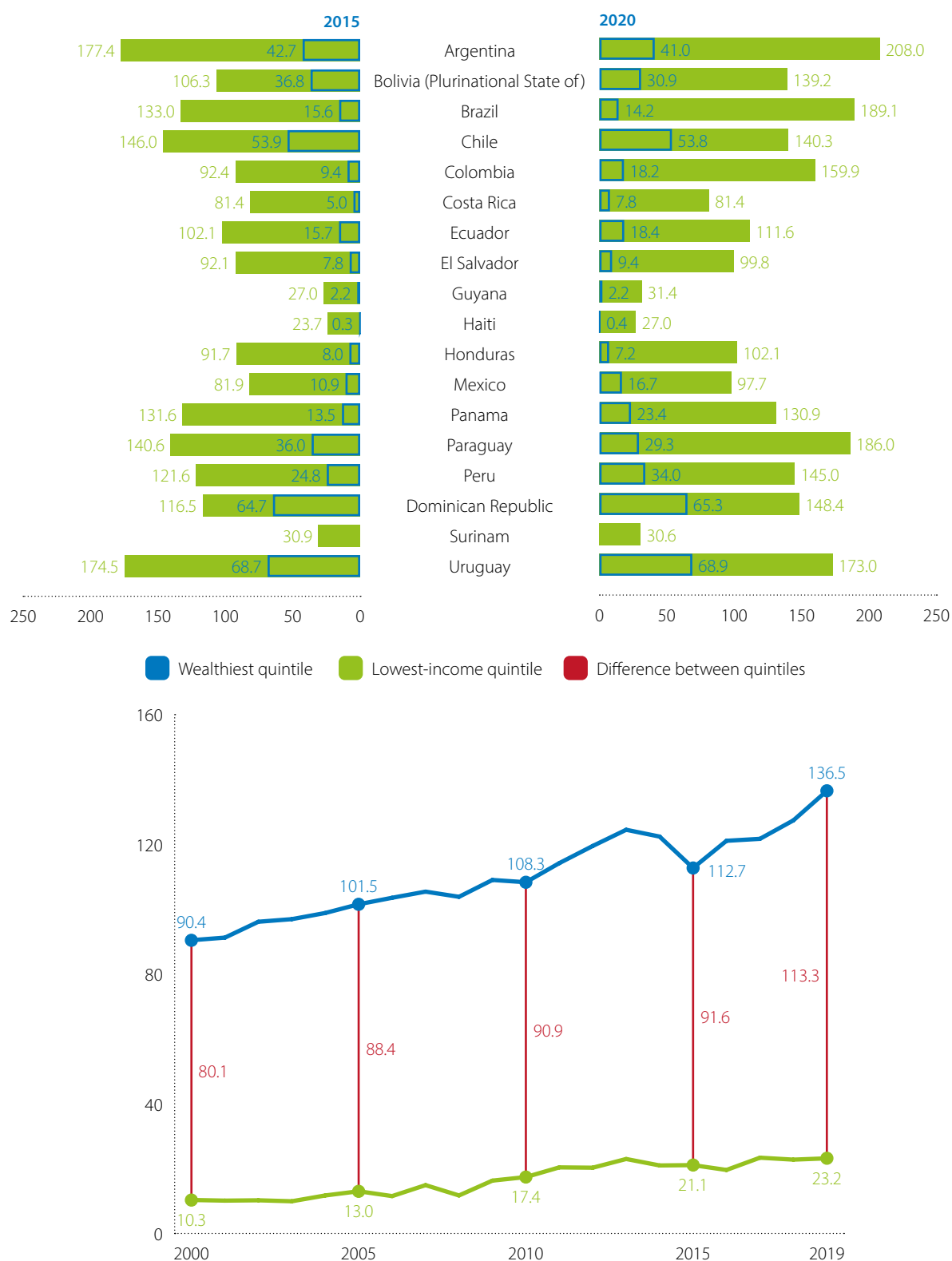
The data show that these unequal opportunities in accessing higher education also negatively affect rural, indigenous and Afrodescendant students. **Figure 7** shows a situation of marked inequity: the fewer opportunities for access available to the rural population are expressed in the fact that the gross

enrollment ratio is notably different between urban and rural areas, up to 44 percentage points among countries with information available. For their part, the gross enrollment ratio is 40% for the indigenous population, 45.5% for the Afrodescendant population, and 71.9% for the rest of the population, among the countries that have this information available.

One worrying aspect of these trends is that the gaps have been increasing over the past five years: although the indicator has improved among the most marginalized population segments, it is increasing at a slower rate than among the rest of the population, which means that inequality of access is worsening. For example, the gap in access between the indigenous and non-indigenous, non-Afrodescendant population was close to 25 points in 2015 and had risen to 32 points by 2019. The trend was similar between urban and rural populations.

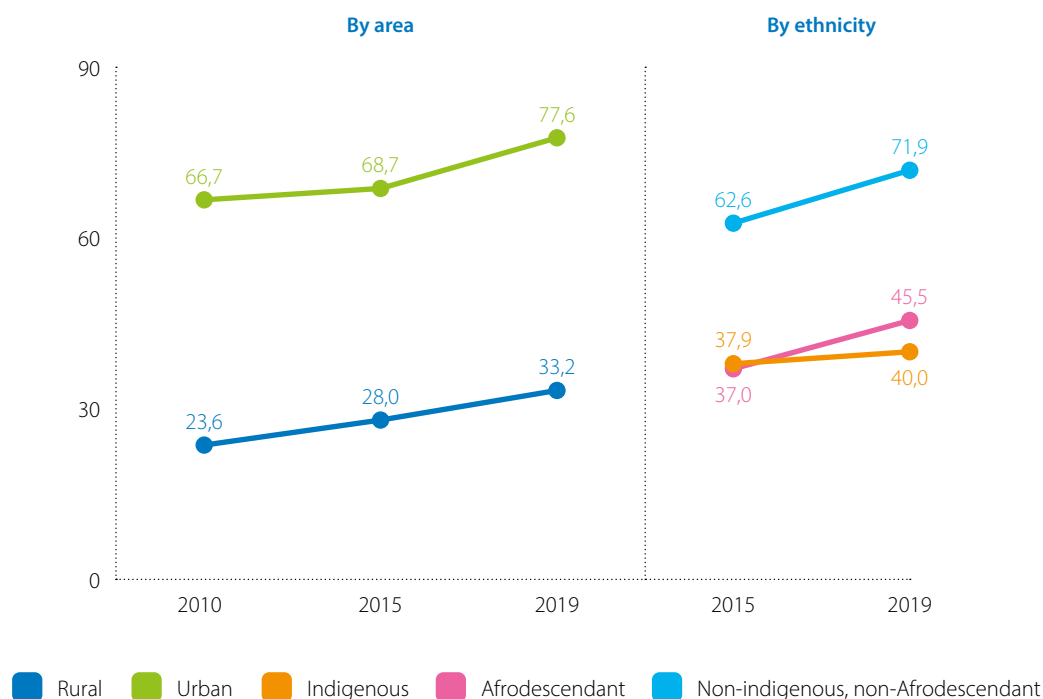
It can thus be observed that between 2015 and 2020, access to higher education has expanded in the region, at the cost of a steady increase in inequality both among and within countries, widening existing gaps even more. This is a continuation of the trend observed in the previous five-year periods.

Figure 6. Gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education, by socioeconomic level. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. 2000-2020



Note: For years circa 2020, 2019 data were used, except for Costa Rica, Haiti and Uruguay (2018). For years circa 2015, 2015 data were used; for Mexico, the rate was estimated from the linear projection of adjacent years. Simple averages were calculated on the basis of countries with information available for the period: the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru. Estimates for 2019 were obtained from ECLAC processing for this project. In some countries, the estimates present slight differences in regard to the UIS data, which may have a slight impact on the comparison. Data for Argentina correspond to urban areas.

Data sources: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at <https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5> (accessed 1 December 2021), and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Database of household surveys.

Figure 7. Gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education (SDG indicator 4.3.2) by area and ethnicity. Latin American countries. Circa 2010, 2015 and 2019.

Note: The circa 2019 data correspond to 2019, except for Mexico (2018) and Chile (2017). The circa 2015 data correspond to 2015, except for Argentina and Mexico (2016). The circa 2010 data correspond to 2010, except for the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Panama (2011). The simple averages were based on countries with information available for the period: for data by zone, this included the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay; data on the indigenous population came from the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Uruguay; and data on the Afrodescendant population was from Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Uruguay. Data for Argentina correspond to urban areas.

Data source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Database of household surveys.

Box 1

Higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic

The closure of higher education institutions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic affected approximately 23.4 million higher education students (ISCED 5, 6, 7 and 8) and 1.4 million teachers in Latin America and the Caribbean (Pedró, 2021b).

While higher education had a significant history of distance education provision before the pandemic, this mode of learning was concentrated in a few universities, particularly at the graduate level (UNESCO IESALC, 2018). As such, the majority of institutions were not prepared for the mass shift to remote learning.

There are indications that this situation may have negatively affected the population's participation in higher education, which may have led to a drop in the indicators analyzed.

Several factors justify this view: first, not all teachers and students have access to the technology necessary to engage in this mode of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the negative economic impact of the pandemic could have forced some students to abandon their higher studies. Then there is the chilling effect of *corona teaching*, a term that refers to teachers' efforts to use the few technological resources available to move in-person classes online, without changing the curriculum or methodology; in other words, to proceed as though they were in the classroom (Pedró, 2021b).

Key education policies between 2000 and 2015

The policies developed in the 21st century can be seen, in part, as an inevitable consequence of the evolution of higher education in the previous decades, the availability of resources and political orientations to meet the growing demand for access to an educational service that responds to a nation's social needs and value chains. On the one hand, economic conditions—although volatile—made more resources available for public expenditure which, in relative terms, grew in virtually all countries, offering greater opportunities for public intervention. However, that same impetus in economic development revealed the need to improve the quality and relevance of higher education, to meet the incessant demands of ever-more demanding labor markets avid for qualified professionals and technicians.

Second, the uncontrolled growth in educational provision in response to the also incessant demand, lacked regulation to guarantee the minimum quality standards that should accompany relevant educational provision. This led, in the early years of this century, to a call for policies to organize and regulate the sector, policies that would establish national priorities and help refine the supply-side. This could only be achieved by strengthening the role of the State as the overseer and sole regulator of the sector, on occasions in contravention of academic freedom.

Third, social demands—particularly those of young people—for the democratization and universalization of access to higher education, found a somewhat positive response from some governments. In summary, on the one hand a good number of countries coincided in strengthening the role of the State as overseer of the system through political-administrative structures, and as mediator, by providing incentives to develop certain professional programs and by creating agencies specializing in quality assurance, in what has been called *collegiate neostatism* (Moreno and Aguirre, 2020). On the other, some governments opted to develop policies to democratize access through an equal opportunity approach, as well as creating agencies to strengthen financing methods such as student loans and scholarships. Lastly, initiatives were also developed to diversify higher education, in an attempt to introduce professional training programs that were more relevant and in line with market needs, in parallel to strictly university-based provision.

Several countries have followed a two-pronged strategy to reinforce the State's role as overseer of higher education. On the one hand, they have gradually increased public investment in higher education, while on the other they have created political-administrative structures to manage the sector. From a financial perspective, the rise in public investment over the past 20 years has been slight (García de Fanelli and Adrogué, 2019), and in some cases irregular as well, following the behavior of national economies. Where a clear increase in public investment in higher education can be identified, that trend has generally been accompanied by reforms focused on creating political-administrative structures to entrench the State's oversight role. This increase in expenditure levels is due, in large measure, to the fact that the specialization of technical-political entities fosters more autonomy and participation in the definition of political agendas, through closer work with the corresponding minister. All of this is crucial for the allocation of resources on strategic governance issues for the sector.

States' investment in their oversight entities has become more important to the functioning of national higher education systems. Recent estimates indicate that, on average, 61% of the resources of public universities in the region have come from governments, which means that institutional budgets depend heavily on these contributions (Arias Ortiz *et al.*, 2021). While this could present a risk, given the volatility of Latin American economies, public expenditure on higher education as a percentage of GDP has grown steadily in some countries of the region. This is true in Chile, where investment tripled from 0.44% of GDP in 2006 to 1.37% in 2017, with the approval of the first university reforms marking major milestones. Likewise, Brazil increased its expenditure as a portion of GDP by 0.77% from 2004 to 2017, while in Argentina this figure grew from 0.62% in 2005 to 1.2% in 2017; in both cases the proportion of public expenditure was doubled, following the approval of major structural reforms.⁴

To date, nine countries of the region have entities specializing to a greater or lesser degree in higher education within the corresponding ministries, including Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Mexico and Uruguay. Peru has taken the first steps to joining this list by approving the creation of a Higher Education Vice-Ministry, although it has not yet become

⁴ See also Chapter 8, on Funding Education.

operational. It is also important to note that Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela have ministries exclusively dedicated to higher education. In all cases, the primary reason given for this specialization has been to strengthen the sector, as shown in the text of regulatory instruments in Brazil (2003), Mexico (2002), Argentina (2005), Colombia (2003), Chile (2006 and 2010) and, more recently, Peru (2021). In all of the countries mentioned, the structural reform processes in ministries of the region have coincided with periods during which expenditure on the education and higher education sectors has increased. It is also worth noting how relations have evolved between governments in the region and international funding organizations, shifting from the well-known bailout loan model in exchange for structural adjustments, to a shared planning model (Ledesma, 2014).

Last but not least, many countries have decided to introduce information systems specifically for the sector to strengthen decision making, monitoring and coordination processes (Moreno and Aguirre, 2020). Chile, Ecuador and Peru pioneered the push to centrally organize such information systems, and this helped to solidify the governments' position in relation to these institutions, as well as their ability to strategically orient policies for the sector. These systems represent, in turn, a notable advance in terms of transparency and public reporting.

If there is one area in which higher education has changed radically over the past two decades, not only in the region but probably around the globe, it is without a doubt that of quality assurance and accreditation (Pedró, 2021a). The nonstop increase in the demand for higher education since the late 20th century—characterized in the previous chapter through an analysis of the data—which few countries were able to resolve by increasing provision or providing suitable regulation, has in many cases resolved itself through uncontrolled expansion and over-commercialization, with no mechanisms to ensure quality. This explosion in the demand is reflected, for example, in Peru where the volume of higher education students tripled between 1995 and 2014 (Wells *et al.*, 2018); and it is even more evident in Brazil, where the number of students rose from 3.8 to 8 million between 2003 and 2016 (Douglass, 2021).

In a marked tendency to strengthen the oversight role of the State, an effort was made to refine the supply of higher education and accredit programs and

institutions, to encourage continuous institutional improvement processes and safeguard the interests of students, their families, and the respective local and national societies in which graduates would provide their services. Nevertheless, the size, diversity, and complexity of higher education systems in the region today have made necessary the introduction of sophisticated, standardized mechanisms for managing educational quality. This concern is present in the new legal higher education frameworks in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. In these countries, the most recent legislative acts specifically address the issues of licensing, evaluation and accreditation of higher education institutions, making the refinement of quality assurance systems a highly important aspect.

Still, most countries in the region have followed the international trend and opted for a collegiate intervention formula to endow the State with greater capacity to act, at least in regard to ensuring quality. By turning to agencies, which are governed by representatives of both the State and the institutions themselves, and which have become progressively more technified and professionalized, governments have been able to make progress while respecting institutional autonomy at the same time. In almost all countries, specialized quality assurance agencies have been created, the sole exception being the Plurinational State of Bolivia and the Caribbean countries, which are following accreditation and quality assurance processes based on Anglosaxon models. Excluding agencies that have just become operational, such as those of Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, and the cases of Honduras and Uruguay, where laws approving the creation of these agencies have been passed but the entities have not yet been created, in the vast majority of countries in the region, these entities have been up and running for more than a decade, in some cases even two.

Some, such as those of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Cuba and Peru, have very solid experience under their belts. As they gain even more traction, the need to adjust their operation to the changing higher education scenario becomes more evident: Chile, for example, recently (in 2018) amended its Higher Education Law, introducing major changes to the system; Ecuador changed its internal regulations; Mexico introduced a new General Higher Education Law in 2021; and Peru's higher education system is still undergoing a period of serious upheaval. In Costa Rica, legislative changes are

being debated that could have major implications for quality assurance (Strah, 2020).

Solid proof of the vigorousness of this trend at the regional scale is the creation of a network of quality assurance agencies (RIACES) and, more recently in 2019, the Ibero-American Quality Assurance System (*Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad*, SIACES), following agreements made at the xxvi Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government. The goals of this entity include promoting peer learning and proposing regionwide criteria for evaluation and accreditation, which were enshrined in the UNESCO-sponsored Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education (2019). Certainly, the work of these agencies—usually funded by the State but managed independently by autonomous expert boards selected on the basis of merit—have resulted in a much more refined array of educational courses on offer, and in many cases has led to a certain purging of low-quality institutions and programs, most of them targeting students in lower socioeconomic levels.

The appreciation of higher education as a strategic sector for economic and social development has led many states to make major efforts to favor more democratic access to it, particularly by increasing coverage by public institutions and strengthening financing mechanisms for students wishing to study in private institutions. In the international scenario, the Latin American and Caribbean region and South Asia continue to have the highest participation of private institutions in the provision of higher education (UNESCO IESALC, 2020c). This regional feature can be explained, to some degree, by late 20th century policies that eased regulatory frameworks and the fact that private institutions often meet the demand that goes unsatisfied by the limited range of public courses available.

The creation of new institutions, and the consolidation of others into larger institutions that can serve more students, has in many cases been aimed at achieving greater differentiation among programs through the creation or expansion of national university systems or technology institutes into zones that previously lacked educational systems at this level, and it therefore has had a notable impact on coverage. The federal government of Brazil, for example, implemented an active policy to expand public higher education under a national plan to restructure and expand federal universities. To this end, it founded 16 new public universities—in some cases by consolidating preexisting

institutions—and opened some 200 university campuses. At the same time, the federal government supported the creation of hundreds of federal institutes of education, science and technology—meaning tertiary technical institutes—that are intended to entrench the public sector's presence in the national non-university higher education segment in areas that are far from Brazil's large cities.

In contrast to Brazil, in Mexico the subsystems with the highest relative growth, thanks to the creation of new institutions, were polytechnical universities, intercultural universities, technological universities, and decentralized technology institutes, while in absolute terms, the greatest increase in enrollment occurred in private higher education institutions and in State-run public universities (ANUIES, 2018). Currently, technical higher education in Mexico is organized into four broad subsystems, each with its own origin and structure, and encompassing some 400 institutions in total. One of them is directed by the National Polytechnic Institute (Instituto Politécnico Nacional), which offers high-priority undergraduate degree programs, while other federal and State-level subsystems tend to offer shorter programs. Since 2009, those other subsystems have coordinated to introduce shared mechanisms to recognize degrees granted, allow student transfers and facilitate mobility among institutions, and are exploring a shared educational quality assessment system (Ruiz Larraguivel, 2011).

For the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 52 of the country's 71 existing public universities were created during the so-called "Bolivarian Revolution" period (1999-2021). In Uruguay, the expansion of educational provision was enabled by the construction of new campuses of the Universidad de la República (UDELAR) and the emergence of a second public institution, the Universidad Tecnológica (UTEC). Lastly, in Argentina, despite the continued predominance of public federal institutions at the university level and the extremely high rates of enrollment in higher education for the Latin American context, the federal government backed a new wave of expansion in public higher education provision in the first decade of this century. From 2005 to 2010, 11 universities and university institutes were created, all with federal support, along with 145 non-State tertiary institutions. This significantly expanded public higher education provision in different parts of the country through the creation of regional centers, satellite campuses, extension centers, and remote learning channels (Brunner and Ferrada Hurtado, 2011).

In addition to expanding their provision, many countries promoted access through measures such as student financial aid, beginning with free tuition. Ecuador chose to decree higher public education free of charge in 2008, while Mexico approved a gradual transition towards free educational services starting in 2022. It thus joins the other countries of the region where higher education is already free—including Argentina, Uruguay, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the federal universities of Brazil. The Ecuadorian case displays some peculiarities, as its free higher education policy was accompanied in 2010 by a strengthened meritocracy in the form of a university entrance exam and a firm policy to eliminate low-quality programs, although both policies came under review as of 2017 (Rivera, 2019).

However, the majority of countries opted to intervene with financing mechanisms without making higher education entirely free. To cover all or part of the instruction they receive, students can pay institutions directly, wholly or in part, from government-backed student loans. These are extended under what are in principle favorable terms, but the magnitude of debt that many students in countries like Chile and Colombia accumulate does not seem to support this. Most countries of the region have developed a variety of student loan programs to help low-income individuals with tuition costs, but—with some exceptions—little is known about their coverage and sustainability (Espinoza, 2013). Critiques abound however, based on very contradictory readings of the more extensive and well-known experiences in the region, such as that of Chile and Colombia, which were a response to demands made by student movements in the context of broader social uprisings (Torres and Sánchez, 2019).

Brazil, for its part, has developed a series of federal assistance programs, although there are contradictory reports about their true scope and impact on tuition financing. One of these, the University for All Program (*Programa Universidad para Todos*, PROUNI) gives government subsidies to private institutions that admit low-income students from public secondary schools, offering a complete or partial reimbursement for tuition—on a sliding scale—for students who score high enough in their final secondary education exams and meet the family income requirements.

In a bid for democratization, in addition to increasing public higher education provision and boosting student financial aid mechanisms, some countries have taken steps to support access to higher education

for disadvantaged and at-risk youth, based on their potential for success (merit, effort, or personal ability). These measures all seek to fight social exclusion (Darity, William and Weisskopf, 2011; Balán, 2020) through preferential treatment or the use of quotas for identifiable segments of the population. The design of these policies is always affected by conditioning factors and national contexts, each with its own historic roots.

Chile's Program for Effective Access and Support for Higher Education (*Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso Efectivo a la Educación Superior*, PACE) offers one notable policy experience. Since 2014, it has offered direct access to higher education for academically outstanding secondary education students who have graduated from schools with the highest educational at-risk rating in each municipality of the country (UNESCO, 2020b). Brazil offers another recent experience worth noting. In just two decades, the country shifted from a system of "universal rights" which practically ignored differences in gender, ethnicity, race and social class in accessing higher education, to a decidedly inclusive set of national policies that included socioeconomic and ethnic-racial quotas. This initiative was ratified by the country's Supreme Court in 2012 when it affirmed the constitutionality of the national social quotas law, which mandated that federal universities reserve 50% of their future spots for students at public secondary schools (Lima, 2011). The efficacy of those measures is evident in the fact that, while in 2003, 36% of undergraduate students enrolled in Brazil's federal universities were children from minority, black or indigenous families, by 2014 this number had risen to 48% (McCowan and Bertolin, 2020).

Affirmative action in higher education also penetrated other countries, such as Colombia. There, the National Higher Education Financing and Loan Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Financiamiento y Crédito para la Educación Superior*, ICETEX) launched a grant program to support the admission of indigenous students, followed by a similar one for Afro-American students. At the same time, several public and private institutions established admission systems to promote the inclusion of students from these two groups, although very few of them offer financial aid or specific services (León and Holguín, 2004). However, as in many countries of the region, in Colombia affirmative action focused more successfully on socioeconomic categories than on race or ethnic origin (Didou Aupetit and Remedi Allione, 2009). Recently, through a public policy entitled *Generación E*, Colombia's Education Ministry provided

investment and operational funding to strengthen the country's 61 public universities, aiming to achieve social transformation by providing new opportunities to more than 336,000 at-risk young people. It is important to note that these policies were put forward in the region during a very favorable economic cycle. When Latin American economies were growing steadily, the percentage of the population living in poverty dropped drastically and the younger generation's access to school and educational attainment also improved continually (Villalobos *et al.*, 2017).

Along the same line, efforts to serve disadvantaged groups like disabled and migrant students from countries such as the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Haiti and those of northern Central America, should also be highlighted. And there is also the promotion of intercultural universities, the goal of which is to foster indigenous peoples' access to ways of learning and knowledge proper to higher education. The complexity and diversity of this subsector is worth noting here, as some of these institutions have been created by States, and others by indigenous or Afrodescendant organizations themselves, and that difference can determine the weight given to indigenous and Afro knowledge, the use of indigenous languages, the hiring of teachers from indigenous communities, and the risk that these institutions will not be recognized by formal education systems (Mato, 2018). For example, between 2003 and 2008, seven public institutions and two private ones were established in Mexico under this model. The goal was to increase the participation of indigenous people in higher education—which in the early 21st century hovered around 1% of all students—to around 10%, matching the percentage of indigenous people in the country's total population (Schmelkes, 2008). According to the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (*Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior*, ANUIES), in 2020 Mexico already had ten intercultural universities and another 70 publicly-funded institutions, as well as 30 privately-funded ones, with indigenous enrollment ranging from 10% to 100%.

Another priority policy area is the diversification of higher education as a lever for boosting young people's practical skills before they join the workforce. The two-pronged goal is to make higher education more relevant, while attracting more students at a lower cost. Essentially, this involves promoting the non-university higher education sector by offering shorter-duration programs focused on meeting the labor market's need

for specialized technicians, whether in the technology, manufacturing, service or agrifood industries. These policies began timidly in the late 20th century, and have only become regionally significant in the past decade. In addition to costing less, non-university higher education programs are more flexible in terms of admission standards (admission is usually open, with no entrance exam) and in the hiring of teachers. While many countries limit private sector participation in the university realm, especially for-profit stakeholders, in non-university higher education it is precisely these kinds of institutions that predominate (Ferreyra *et al.*, 2021). Brazil is a notable case in point in the region: according to the 2018 *Censo de Educação Superior* survey (INEP, 2019), from the 13,529,101 spots available in undergraduate programs, 12,693,532 were in private institutions.

The expansion in non-university institutions occurred mostly in the private sector, or entirely in the case of Chile. This can be explained to a large degree by the decoupling of tertiary education systems that are primarily focused on producing university graduates from productive sectors characterized by high rates of informal employment and a growing demand for technical labor. This disconnection between the demand for more technical skills and a tertiary system that produces mainly university graduates is a huge problem in countries like Peru: just 15% of jobs in the Peruvian market require university studies, yet universities account for 65% of tertiary enrollment. This mismatch between education and production is a problem for 24% of employers around the globe, and totals 32% in Latin America and the Caribbean (Ferreyra *et al.*, 2021). Recent studies also confirm that non-university higher education programs attract more students from lower socioeconomic brackets, as their practical, flexible nature enables these students to study while working, graduate earlier in most cases and successfully obtain employment afterwards (Gaentzsch and Zapata-Román, 2020). For their part, standardized university entrance exams become in many cases another barrier to entry for students, particularly those from secondary technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs and others who, faced with the difficulty of preparing adequately for these tests, opt for a non-university program even though they had the potential for success in a university program. Despite this, TVET provision does not seem to have taken off yet, partly because its advantages are not well known among the public, or simply because there remains some prejudice against it, and a bias for the more highly-valued university programs (Ferreyra *et al.*, 2021).

Long before the pandemic erupted, distance higher education was indicative of the supply-side adapting to the diversification of delivery channels (UNESCO IESALC, 2017). Coverage by this modality has grown by 73% since 2010, while in-person learning grew by just 27%. In 2010, almost 2.5 million of the 21 million first degree students in universities in the region were studying remotely, representing 12% of the total. By 2017, this learning modality represented 15% of the total, or 4.3 million students. However, its penetration is still incipient and varies extremely among countries of the region. Brazil has the largest participation in distance learning in first degree higher education, with more than a million students. This way of teaching has also gained ground in Colombia and Mexico, where in 2017 it accounted for 14%-18% of the student body.

Policy trends between 2015 and 2021

The sweeping policy approaches that began in the early years of this century continued to solidify until the pandemic erupted. The inclusion of higher education among the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda had a notable effect on institutions in this sector, but more in the sense of reaffirming their public commitment to sustainability in general and to the sustainable development goals in particular, than as a direct response to the specific target regarding access to higher education. In contrast, this inclusion did not seem to make a direct impression on public policies in the region, as references to it in national policy documents and in legislation are virtually non-existent, at least to date.

Whether due to the influence of the international agenda or not, strategies have been deployed to expand access in a few countries during recent years, democratizing it even more. First, these strategies have acted directly on the economic conditions limiting access, focusing on tuition and fees and expanding the volume and coverage of financial aid, although without yet attaining free higher education for all. Second, attempts have been made to expand public educational coverage as a way of quickly improving access to higher education.

Colombia exemplifies the first strategy, specifically in its Zero Tuition Program (*Programa Matrícula Cero*), although it needs more political will and substantial budgetary support to implement and ensure its continuity. This is because the program was introduced in response to a lengthy national strike in 2021 led by university students, who demanded universal free access to higher education. Chile, despite its high

gross rates of access to higher education, has faced intense criticism from organized social movements, which have repeatedly denounced the inequalities present and the burden that financial debt incurred under the student loan system places upon the most economically disadvantaged. Although universal free higher education was expected to be in place by 2020, the measures implemented to date have effectively reached students from the six lowest deciles of the population, by income distribution (Brunner and Labraña, 2018). In any case, the group of countries in the region with truly free and universal higher education is limited to Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. At the same time, specific affirmative action programs to encourage inclusion were also introduced in many countries of the region, including Argentina, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru and the Dominican Republic (Bernasconi and Celis, 2017).

Meanwhile, Mexico and Peru have opted for expanding public higher education provision under a vision that attempts to combine the promotion of equity with a bid for territorial rebalancing. Mexico began its project before the pandemic, and it has not been free from criticism due to the fact that the proposed new institutions are not intrinsically academic. However, the country's new higher education legislation calls for the creation of a program by 2022 to expand the range of educational programs on offer. In contrast, a similar initiative was designed in Peru, partly in response to the pandemic, when it became clear that students in territories with little institutional coverage had difficulty accessing higher education. This hindered equality of opportunities; but above all, it came about as a requirement of the higher education public policy launched in 2020 under the National Educational Project to 2036 (*Proyecto Educativo Nacional al 2036*), which seeks to raise the rate of access from the current level of 30% to 48%. It also should be noted that, at the end of the licensing period, more than a third of Peruvian universities were denied a license. This means that the expansion of public provision must also include a measure to ensure that students who were enrolled in those establishments that were forced to close because they did not meet the minimum quality standards can transfer to a licensed one.

The fundamental question is whether advances in democratizing access do not in fact contain a hidden segregation mechanism that, when combined with institutional differentiation, results in access that is also

Box 2**The university reform in Peru**

In July 2014, University Law 30.220 was passed in Peru to launch the reorganization of the country's university system, in a bid to strengthen the social role of universities and guarantee the right of students to access a quality education service. That restructuring dissolved the National Assembly of Rectors (*Asamblea Nacional de Rectores*, ANR), which was composed of university rectors, and transferred to the Education Ministry (MINEDU) the responsibility for coordinating the sector's stakeholders and formulating its budget and public investments. The University Law is a milestone in the Peruvian context, as it establishes the regulatory framework for the licensing process to follow and strengthens the State's role by making MINEDU responsible for governing the university higher education quality assurance policy.

As well as strengthening the State's role, this reform envisions the creation of the Superintendency of

Higher University Education (*Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria*, SUNEDU) as an autonomous regulatory authority charged with determining and verifying compliance with basic aspects of quality that are part of the licensing process authorizing public and private universities to operate. SUNEDU thus has taken on the duties of regulation, oversight and enforcement, including verifying compliance with the eight basic conditions of quality and the appropriate use of the public resources allocated. It should be noted that there are currently no middle to high-middle income countries that do not have quality assurance procedures, which is reflected in the effect of the licensing processes. A recent study found that graduates of universities licensed by SUNEDU had a greater return on investment in regard to income, employability and hourly wages, while those attending institutions denied a license experienced the opposite effect (Flor Toro, Magnaricotte and Alba, 2020).

For more information, please visit: <https://on.unesco.org/3LFTA4T>.

differentiated on the basis of socioeconomic strata. In other words, participation grows, but the new students end up concentrated in less prestigious institutions, and those students from disadvantaged sectors are the ones with the highest dropout rates, which leads to what has been called "inclusion that excludes" (Ezcurra, 2019). The data analyzed in the previous chapter warn of the widening of some gaps in inclusion.

Some evidence indicates that in several countries, the most prestigious institutions have remained on the margins of the democratization of access process (García de Fanelli and Adrogué, 2019). In Chile, the number of students enrolled in the institutions that form part of the celebrated Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities (*Consejo de Rectores de la Universidades Chilenas*, CRUCH) has not grown significantly, despite the fact that overall enrollment has increased; the new free-of-charge policy may change this situation in the future. In Argentina, enrollment expanded more vigorously in new universities located in areas where lower-income populations reside. In contrast, in Uruguay over the 2015-2020 period, enrollment in the Universidad de la República (UDELAR) rose by close to 4.5% annually, while in parallel budgetary increases, the quantity of teaching hours, square meters of building space and support staff hours all grew.

As with all areas of life, the pandemic brought everyday activity to a virtual standstill in higher education institutions and pushed them to find solutions to ensure the continuity of learning by meeting the needs emerging from the situation. Despite having few resources, institutions have made notable efforts in a multitude of areas in this regard, including on the strictly health-related front, adjusting academic calendars, helping to mitigate the pandemic through research and development, guaranteeing the continuity of educational activities through remote learning, and providing support not only in the form of materials such as books and technologies, but also socially and emotionally to the university community.

Not all governments responded so promptly to the situation, although the array of responses deployed was similar on three simultaneous fronts (UNESCO IESALC, 2020a): economic, technological, and pedagogical.

First, on the economic front, some governments transferred extraordinary amounts of resources and students benefited from flexible loan repayment plans and extensions to deadlines for grant and loan applications to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Through United for Colombia (*Unidos por Colombia*)

Box 3**Promoting high quality in Colombia**

With a view to establishing guidelines for the accreditation of high quality between now and 2034, the Colombian Education Ministry undertook a broad-based participatory process with all stakeholders in the quality Assurance System to generate the public consensus and legitimacy needed for the design of the new regulations. This lengthy process of reflection, analysis and debate held in 2018 and 2019 through a public consultation entitled “Quality IS for everyone” (*Calidad ES de Todos*) ultimately led to Agreement 2 of the National Education Council of 2020, part of the 2016-2026 Ten-Year Education Plan. The plan affirms that Colombia must advance in meeting the agreements pledged under different international pacts and at UNESCO global conferences and the Sustainable Development

Goals, in particular in relation to guaranteeing inclusive, quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

In addition to blazing a trail towards academic excellence and having the unique quality of being a policy based on broad-based participation, Colombia’s high-quality accreditation integrates learning outcomes across the board as indicators of the level of quality of service. While measuring learning can be technically complex to implement, this approach departs from traditional models that assess quality standards based on institutional and programmatic capacities and processes, and instead makes the student the focal point of quality assurance. This idea of recognizing learning outcomes as a cornerstone of university quality defines an intuitive yet innovative path towards excellence in higher education systems.

and FOGAPE-COVID⁵ in Chile, the governments of those countries provided State-guaranteed loans to offset the impact on the sector. Likewise, Peru’s National Scholarship and Educational Loan Program (*Programa Nacional de Becas y Crédito Educativo*, PRONABEC) launched the Continuation of Studies (*Continuidad de Estudios*) grant to mitigate the number of dropouts resulting from the pandemic and modified its planning for 2020 by increasing the number of grants offered from 18,000 to a total of 42,000. In Mexico, the Support Fund for Financial Restructuring & Addressing Structural Problems in Public State-run Universities (*Fondo de Apoyo para el Saneamiento Financiero y la Atención a Problemas Estructurales de las Universidades Públicas Estatales*) increased its budget and the number and amount of higher education grants, from a total fund of around US\$378 million in 2018 to US\$620 million in 2021. Although the stakeholders responsible for higher education funding implemented various student assistance strategies to stimulate students’ entry and continuity in these institutions, the structural conditions of higher education systems coupled with an unfavorable economic context, limit these actions and threaten the continuity and sustainability of many of the initiatives and strategies undertaken (Arias Ortiz *et al.*, 2021).

Second, measures were introduced to provide technological resources to both institutions and students, with the aim of reducing the existing digital gap and ensuring educational continuity. To this end, Argentina’s Education Ministry organized a program with the country’s leading cellphone service providers to provide unlimited data access to the websites of Argentina’s 57 national universities. Government initiatives—such as this one—were joined by some organized universities themselves. These included the laptop grant offered by *Universidad de La República de Uruguay*, and the “Your PC” (*Tu PC*) fund for students at the *Universidad Nacional de la Plata* in Argentina to provide technology resources to the student community.

Third, on the pedagogical front, given the lack of experience with the virtual learning environment, Chile, Panama and Peru, for example, developed pedagogical training mechanisms to help teachers adapt. Colombia addressed the pedagogical component with a regulatory framework focused on academic activities and technology use. Lastly, many quality assurance agencies, including the Peruvian national superintendency of higher university education (*Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria*, SUNEDU), have facilitated the transition towards remote education by formulating guidelines and instructions for institutions.

⁵ Small Business Guarantee Fund (Fondo de Garantía para el Pequeño Empresario, FOGAPE).

It is still too early to assess the impact that the pandemic will have on higher education in the region. By all indications, there have been major losses in learning, the loss of students who will never return and a loss of equity, as the impacts have been much more severe for more vulnerable students, and probably for women more than men as well. However, the health emergency has opened a window of opportunity for digital transformation in higher education systems, for the adoption of new pedagogies and for greater collaboration at the international level.

Future challenges

First of all, it should be noted that the effects and opportunities that could ultimately be generated by the pandemic will continue to impact the higher education sector over the coming years. In Latin America and the Caribbean, it is clear that higher education institutions, with the support of governments, have made major efforts to guarantee the continuity of learning during the pandemic. These efforts have enabled institutions to boost their technological and pedagogical capacities, and by doing so have generated the expectation of further innovation. But to ensure these expectations are realized, it is necessary for university leaders to propose strategies for moving beyond the crisis, that can be sustained over time and that contain a transformative vision of university teaching. The most determinant factor will be for institutions to know what public support they will have, to enable them to commit to reforms that optimize technology use and develop teachers' pedagogical skills, both conditions that are indispensable for successful hybridization. Although many governments have done what they can to support the higher education system during the pandemic, the way they design exit strategies will depend on the availability of public resources, on policy options and on their confidence in the role that higher education can play in the context of social and economic recovery.

Even before the pandemic struck, a change in orientation could be perceived in the emphasis of public higher education policies. The broadening and diversification of channels of access to higher education remained high-priority goals of education policy for a long time, but in countries that have achieved high levels of coverage, and—as Trow described (1973)—have gone from massification to universal access, the expansion of the system is already no longer the top policy priority. In its place, other concerns have come powerfully to the forefront: increasing educational

quality, if not the quest for excellence, and in particular the promotion of graduate studies; the bid for greater equity, reflected in better financial aid mechanisms for students; and the strengthening of research and its role in encouraging innovation, to foster integration within international academic networks. These aspects, which have been little studied to date, are coupled with a push to qualify professionals in science and technology fields, develop researchers and promote research as a substantial element of national development, and construct the infrastructure necessary to meaningfully engage in a range of academic activities on an international scale (Sarmiento and Díaz, 2018). Certainly, linking higher education, research, innovation and development will continue to be a challenge in the region, and governments will have to determine the strategic value of the sector for their nations' future development.

Looking ahead to 2030, there are also major challenges associated with the stratification of education systems, as their diversification is undoubtedly an essential pathway to universal access. In the face of the continent's well known structural inequalities, States have the task of establishing public policies that lead to the legitimization of alternative higher education mechanisms. This means thinking about higher education as more than just universities themselves, in order to increase access by strengthening technical and vocational education and training and effective mobility among the different educational programs available. In addition to the challenges outlined, it is important to highlight the affirmation of UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education (UNESCO IESALC, 2021), that establishing a new social contract that can strengthen the transformative effect of education will be a key component on the international agenda in the coming years. To call for the construction of a new social contract, with the participation of civil society and political and economic sectors, in which the concept of higher education as a public good is collaboratively entrenched, is one of the first starting points for ensuring lasting support, particularly at times when public funding for higher education is looking at serious cutbacks.

All of these challenges should not neglect policies aimed at improving equity, as beyond the illusion that improved rates of access may create, the expansion of higher education does not necessarily lead to its democratization or to the elimination of barriers to access (García de Fanelli and Adrogué, 2019). Education

must be understood as a continuum that begins in early childhood and continues throughout life, and it should offer quality. Governments must accompany their educational policies with quality education and structural equity measures that are deployed from multiple ministries, as schools alone cannot resolve the lack of equity. Only then can a more equitable distribution of opportunities for entry into higher education be achieved, where the student's own potential for success and their efforts, rather than their background, will determine their entry. And where this fails, governments must take additional measures to ensure that any student who has the potential for success has a chance to continue, regardless of unrelated factors. Today, inequalities are reflected in how a student's social origin affects their chances of remaining at school and completing their studies, even in a context of educational expansion, while education with the highest quality and prestige is captured by the most affluent social strata (Pla *et al.*, 2021). The challenges here are to better coordinate basic education and strengthen both financial and pedagogical mechanisms that aid access and improve

success rates and, later on, employability. This is not only a challenge for governments, but also for institutions and even families, both of which play a crucial role in supporting students' permanence and timely graduation. In that sense, ways must be found to best resolve the tension between need and merit in the right to higher education.

To respond to these new priorities, in many countries, States must encourage social dialogue, improve the governance of the sector and, in particular, enhance their own capacities for operating as its overseer in an environment that is increasingly complex, and in which institutional autonomy will be a permanent fixture. The progressive technification of governance, whether from the maturing of quality assurance agencies or the increasing importance of information systems and indicators, will require internal capacity building and more sophisticated regulatory mechanisms. This is partly because of the complex nature of governance, and to avoid limiting institutions' autonomy and capacity for innovation, flexibility and differentiation are entirely indispensable.

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