



Executive Summary

# MEASURING THE IMPACT OF EQUITY PROMOTION POLICIES

Lessons from Colombia: National and institutional levels



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**Title** Measuring the Impact of Equity Promotion Policy  
Lessons from Colombia: National and Institutional Levels

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Dr. Salmi is Professor Emeritus of Higher Education Policies at the Diego Portales University of Chile, and associate researcher at the Center for Higher Education of Boston College. He is also a member of the International Quality Assurance Advisory Group and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Chilean EdTech startup uPlanner.

He is the author of many publications on higher education, including the books *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities*, published in 2009; *The Path to Academic Excellence: The Creation of World-Class Research Universities*, co-edited with Professor Phil Albatch, in 2011, and *Tertiary Education and the Sustainable Development Goals*, published in August 2017.

He holds a Master's degree in Public and International Affairs from the University of Pittsburgh and a PhD in Development Studies from the University of Sussex.

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International expert in education, who has supported governments in their educational reforms and peace education programs. She served as the World Bank's senior education specialist for Latin American and Caribbean countries for twenty-three years until October 2014. During that period, she provided advice on strategic planning and capacity building to improve the quality of education, both at the national and regional levels, through change management, resource mobilization, quality assurance, public-private partnerships, promotion of equity, policy orientation, analytical work, and design and implementation of peace education programs.

For the past seven years she has been an independent consultant to multilateral development banks, bilateral cooperation agencies, think tanks and non-governmental organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Econometrics Consultants. She has also supported the strengthening of peace education programmes as a member of the Board of Directors of the Foundation for Reconciliation.

She holds a master's degree in Education from the University of Florida. She has published numerous articles and book chapters concerning educational reforms and peace education experiences.

## Elizabeth Bernal Gamboa

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She is currently the academic coordinator of the Colombian Association of Universities –ASCUN and a visiting professor at the National University of Colombia. She has worked as project manager and academic administrator in different units of the National University of Colombia. She is an expert and research advisor on the subject of education for universities, consulting firms, the Andrés Bello Agreement and the Ministry of National Education. She has taught at universities in the field of anthropology and research.

Her most recent publications are on topics of university management and the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. She co-authored the publications: *“Universidad 2030. Higher education as an instrument of regional development”*, *“Challenges of education and social mobility in Latin America”* and *“Guide to the foundations for the management of internationalization strategies of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean”*. She was co-author of the book *“Management of quantitative information in universities”*, editor and co-author of four publications that were the result of the project: *“Vision 20/ UN: construction of the vision and the prospective plan of the National University of Colombia for 20 years”*. She is co-author of the article *“Q Methodology: an alternative for participation in the reform of higher education policy in Colombia”*, the book *“Six central themes associated with the basic conditions of quality of institutions and programs of higher education”*, and six publications on internal models of quality assurance for higher education institutions, in addition to other publications on Anthropology in Colombia.

She holds a degree in psychology from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, and a Master in Anthropology from the National University of Colombia.





# Prologue

For the Lumina Foundation, which for the past 20 years has worked to make learning opportunities beyond secondary education available to all, it is a pleasure and an honor to present this book in a country whose commitment and efforts to ensure inclusive higher education are evidenced by the results and lessons hereby presented.

In 2018 and 2019, the Foundation sponsored two major studies in which Colombia participated. The first, called *All Around the World*, sought to assess the nature and scope of national governments' political commitments to promote greater equality of opportunity in access and success in higher education. This study found that, except for a few fragile states recovering from a natural catastrophe or major political crisis, equity is a priority in the higher education discourse of most governments. This official commitment reflects the fact that young people around the world are well aware that the odds of professional success and social mobility are directly related to opportunities in higher education.

However, beyond official statements on equity, which tend to reflect commonly shared inclusion principles, a wide and diverse range of situations were found, when it came to translating these principles into real policies and interventions. In many countries, the equity agenda is simply a good intention or a policy approach that does not translate into real actions and financial resources to ensure access to higher education for the most vulnerable populations.

The study also compared national equity policies at the international level from the point of view of comprehensiveness and coherence. Countries surveyed (71 in total) were classified into four categories of equity policies: 1) emerging, 2) developing, 3) established and 4) advanced. Colombia ranked in the category of countries with well-established policies.

This first study was not intended, in any way, to examine the effects of equity policies, nor to evaluate the degree of effectiveness of the various policies formulated and implemented, nor to measure their real impact on the

various target groups of equity. With the above in mind, in 2019, the Lumina Foundation carried out a second study, *What Works*, for which five countries were selected, representing the main regions of the world and, in each of them, a certain number of universities, in order to analyze in greater depth, the results and impacts of the interventions of both the policies of national equity such as those that the public and private universities themselves establish and implement.

The five countries selected as case studies are from very different regions of the world (Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe and the Pacific). However, they have common characteristics and illustrate converging trends that suggest a number of relevant lessons to share. These lessons reinforce, in particular, the observation made in the 2018 Lumina study that national commitment, which renders into comprehensive and well-resourced policies, is indispensable for designing and implementing effective policies to promote equity and overcome both financial and non-monetary barriers. Similarly, a long-term vision is key to ensuring the continuity and coherence of policies to promote equity. Colombia was one of the countries analyzed, allowing to share in a very generous way its interventions both at the national and institutional levels, showing its achievements, its challenges and difficulties. In all this there are great lessons learned so the publication of this new book, which analyzes in detail this experience, will be very useful for the countries of the region and beyond.

Similarly, to complement the current panorama in terms of equity in higher education, an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in the world, specially focused on Colombia, is included. It was based on the study, also carried out in this regard, by the Lumina Foundation in 2020, and in surveys conducted by ASCUN in that same year.

***Courtney Brown, PhD.***

Vice President of Lumina Foundation, USA.

## Preamble

There are several reflections, recommendations and lessons to be learned from this study of the Measurement of the Impact of Policies to Promote Equity, carried out by the Lumina Foundation and ASCUN. Today, more than ever, the world is facing great challenges and transformations marked by the fourth industrial revolution, adding to them the impacts generated by the current health crisis that we are experiencing worldwide, with strong consequences in Latin America, visible in the different sectors, including education. As the study states it, the emergency we are experiencing worldwide has deepened inequality gaps for access and permanence in education at all levels, this time not only due to economic factors but also to the digital gap, not forgetting the effects on learning outcomes in students.

To face these new challenges, it is not enough to create the conditions to ensure the right to quality education for all, but it is also necessary to make sure that it provides the opportunities for people who have historically been excluded by specific economic, political, geographical and cultural conditions, to access and be successful in conditions of equity. Therefore, it is essential to have an educational system that recognizes and accepts differences and see them as a positive aspect in the balance of existence.

Understanding equity and inclusion in the framework of education is a permanent process that recognizes the right of everyone to quality training based on the recognition and appreciation of difference and diversity, key elements to ensure access, permanence, participation and timely graduation of students. In the Colombian context, based on the Inclusive Higher Education Policy of the Ministry of National Education (2013), diversity requires rescuing the richness of the identity and particularities of those students who, for social, economic, political, cultural, physical, linguistic and geographical reasons, require special protection.

Guaranteeing equity in access to higher education implies creating the conditions that allow groups that have historically been excluded by various circumstances, to access and remain in higher education while achieving

social mobility as graduates. It consists of considering the diversities and inequities existing in reality and making visible the different forms of discrimination that have been generated against populations considered as “minorities”. Likewise, it is necessary to implement financial, pedagogical and retention strategies, so that students who have accessed manage to successfully complete their training process.

HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) are called, within the framework of our responsibility, to adopt policies, strategies and practices of equity and equal access, which must be reflected in the institutional mission and educational project. Likewise, it is essential to invest in the continuous training of teachers as central actors of the inclusion processes and promote the design and implementation of innovative pedagogical approaches that take into account the particularities of students in the processes of learning and skills development. Likewise, it is necessary to have the required tools and resources to carry out an articulated pedagogical practice appropriate to the needs of the educational community. It is also essential to support retention, graduation and work linkages in such a way that a successful participation in educational and work environments might be achieved.

Finally, and as demonstrated by the findings and conclusions of this study, the promotion and implementation of equity and inclusion policies are fundamental in a country affected by armed conflict and forced displacement, which has left some regions difficult to access. Therefore, strategies that consider a higher education that reaches intermediate cities and remote places of the country are fundamental to continue advancing in the construction of peace. In the same sense, an education with equity implies, as proposed by the Sustainable Development Goal number 5, that we can ensure women’s equal opportunities in higher education. This will have a positive impact so that they can strengthen themselves as agents of change in their families, communities and regions, thereby substantially contributing to prosperous economies and sustainable development.

***Padre Harold Castilla Devoz, CJM***

Rector of Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios–UNIMINUTO

# Presentation

Public policies make sense if they are oriented to the search for equity to meet multiple needs of society and encompass substantial benefits for the population through greater coverage for all groups.

Colombia is a country with many opportunities to live, train, develop new ventures, and promote sustainable and environmentally feasible projects. However, the need to improve access to higher education, especially in marginalized areas where vulnerable population groups or minority populations have limited opportunities, requires the consideration of the effects of policies to promote equity in education in such a way that those improvements are generated both in the formulation, as well as in the execution and permanent monitoring of the result of such policies.

The Colombian Association of Universities -ASCUN-, with its mission of promoting the principles of academic quality, university autonomy, search and dissemination of knowledge and social responsibility, joins the initiatives of the Lumina Foundation and the reflections that authors Jamil Salmi, Martha Laverde and Elizabeth Bernal address in this publication, reflecting their long experience and prolific research and extensive knowledge of higher education, which makes a significant contribution to the measurement of the impact of policies for the promotion of equity in Colombia.

This document starts with presenting the sector context, then describes various approaches to measure the impact of equity promotion policies, finally presenting specific aspects of the higher education system in Colombia, and some references to relevant international cases, without neglecting the impact of the pandemic on the sector. The value of this work stems from the identification of strengths and challenges, and the valuable recommendations for both public policy at the national level and at the institutional level.

In addition, the case studies with contributions from various Colombian universities provide a useful overview of institutional policies, strategies and local program seeking to increase access to higher education and academic success for students from traditionally under-represented groups.

We are grateful for the support provided by Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios–UNIMINUTO. Preparation of this document illustrates the commitment of ASCUN and its members to promote joint efforts of associative work for the dissemination and transfer of knowledge based on the experience of the Colombian higher education institutions dedicated to finding lasting solutions to the big challenges that affect the development of Colombian society.

We are convinced that this book will be a valuable input to inform the public debate on equity promotion policies at the national and institutional levels. It will also, hopefully, help to guide strategic decisions that determine the improvement of living conditions of vulnerable and less-favored populations. Higher education can make a great contribution in this respect.

***Oscar Domínguez González***  
ASCUN Executive Director

# Introduction

The 2018 *All Around the World study*, sponsored by the Lumina Foundation in the United States, sought to assess the political commitments of national governments in the promotion of greater equality of opportunity, access and success in higher education. The study identified three promising trends: (1) a growing number of countries have combined financial and non-monetary interventions to remove barriers faced by students from disadvantaged groups in a comprehensive manner; (2) some governments have begun to supplement the direct support offered to students with incentives for the universities themselves; and (3) new categories in the broad classification of *minorities*<sup>1</sup> appear. However, while the vast majority of countries officially declare themselves to be in favor of equity, few have formulated detailed strategies to promote it, defining concrete objectives for the enrollment and support of vulnerable students, or for the mobilization of appropriate resources aimed at aiding underrepresented groups to ensure greater equity.

A second study, *What Works*, also sponsored by Lumina Foundation in 2019, explored which equity promotion interventions appear to be most successful and assessed under what conditions some policies work best. This report was based on five case studies from a small sample of countries and, in each one of them, some universities that apply comprehensive equity policies in higher education or that have experimented with innovative approaches.

These countries were: Australia (Pacific region), Austria (Europe), Colombia (South America), South Africa (Africa) and Vietnam (Southeast Asia).

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1 For example: First generation of students (Australia, United States), LGBTQIA (Brazil, Colombia), Victims of sexual abuse/violence (Colombia, Ecuador, Spain), Deported migrants (Ecuador, Mexico), Children of veterans and war invalids (Mexico, Russia, Vietnam), Refugees (Australia, Colombia, New Zealand), Children from military family (England), Displaced persons inmates as a result of conflict, civil war or natural disasters (Colombia, Georgia), Demobilized guerrillas and paramilitaries (Colombia), Students who do not speak the language of the country (Denmark), Students requiring special care, orphans, young people without a family (Austria, England, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Scotland), Single mothers (Ecuador), Families with more than three children (Georgia, South Korea), Children from parents deported during the Soviet era (Georgia), Prisoners, former prisoners (Venezuela, Wales), Students from occupied territories (Georgia). Source: Salmi (2018).



As a follow up to these studies, the Lumina Foundation and the Colombian Association of Universities (ASCUN)<sup>2</sup> decided to make a joint publication in Spanish to give greater visibility to the results of the What Works study, especially with regard to the Colombian case. This publication includes a comprehensive presentation of the Colombian higher education system and incorporates new universities in the analysis of what happens at the institutional level in the Colombian case, thus achieving greater coverage of case studies at the regional level and better balance between public and private universities. It also describes the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, both globally and specifically in Colombia, and attempts to draw lessons learned from the measures taken by the Government and the institutions themselves. The purpose of this publication is to disseminate, in Colombia and other parts of the world, the equity promotion efforts made during the last decades in Colombia at both the national and institutional levels. While this executive summary presents the most relevant findings of the study, the full publication is available at [www.ascun.org.co](http://www.ascun.org.co).

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<sup>2</sup> ASCUN gathers 90% of public and private universities from all regions of Colombia, with the mission of promoting the principles of autonomy, quality, knowledge and social responsibility. ASCUN seeks to be a bridge of dialogue among institutions of higher education in Colombia and to help Higher Education Institutions interact with the State and society.



Photograph:

Felipe Cazares  
Universidad de los Andes

# 1. Measuring the impact of equity promotion policies

*Not everything that can be measured counts,  
not everything that can be counted is meaningful.*

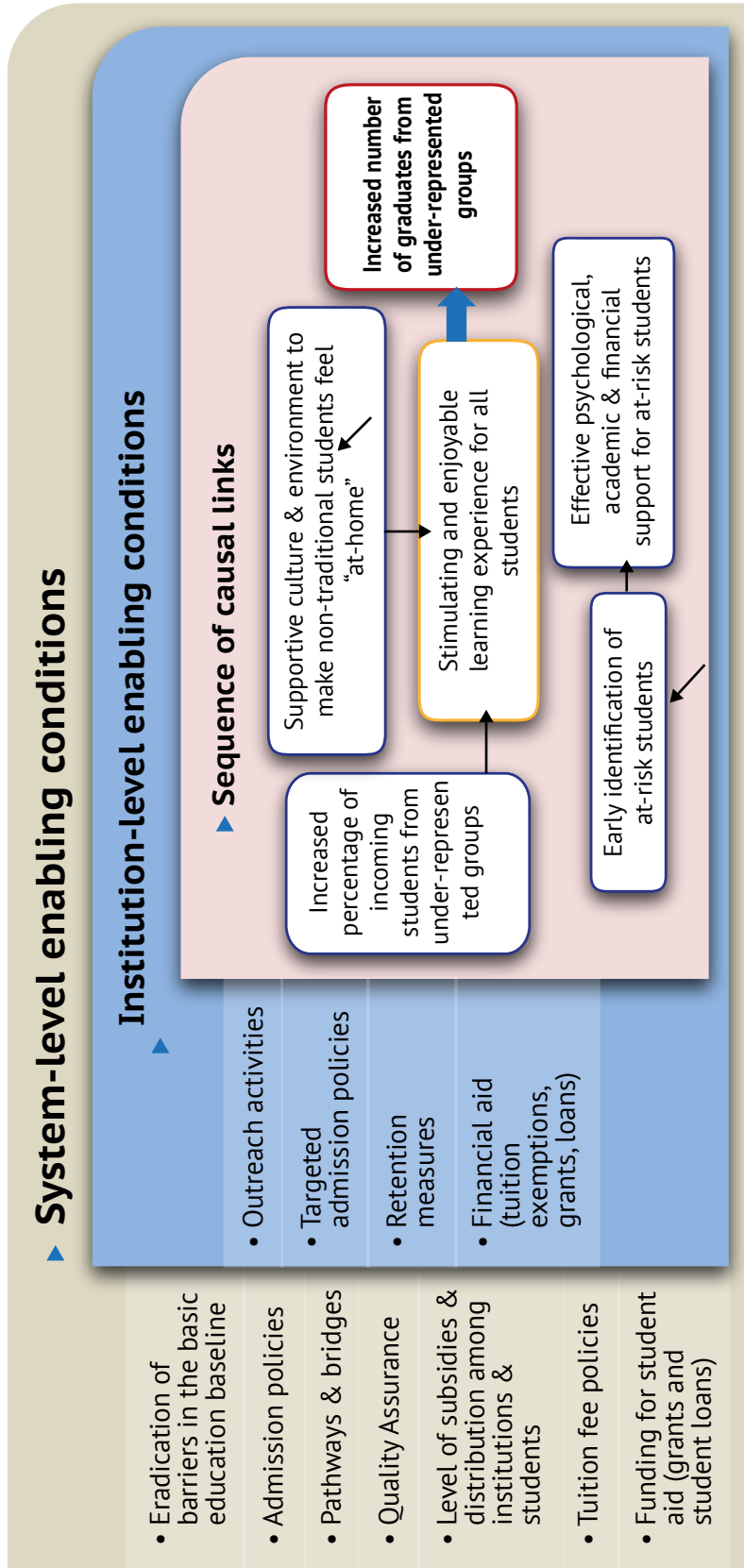
ALBERT EINSTEIN

From a methodological point of view, measuring the impact of policies to promote equity in higher education involves three steps: 1) characterization of the target population groups, 2) explanation of factors that can have a positive effect on the equity situation of target groups, and 3) assessment of the results of equity promotion policies.

Concerning the first step, equity target groups refer to students from underrepresented groups in society, which governments and institutions should recognize and support as part of their policies to promote equity. However, there is no universally accepted definition of underrepresented groups, as definitions and classifications vary among continents and countries (Salmi and Sursock, 2018).

To explain the factors behind disparities in higher education, the report builds on a theory of change that identifies two sets of contextual factors (dimensions at the system level and at the institutional level) that affect the performance of HEIs with respect to their equity results. It also proposes a sequence of inputs, interventions, and intermediate consequences that should lead to better equity outcomes (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Theory of change to promote equity in higher education



Source: Salmi (2018).

For the definition of appropriate statistical measures, the full book of this publication describes the advantages and disadvantages of the various measures of disparity available for higher education. In general, it is important to understand differences among indexes to identify those that are appropriate for cross-country comparisons and those best suited for specific studies in each country.





Photograph:

Universidad Industrial de  
Santander (UIS)





Photograph:

Universidad de Los Andes

## 2. General data on higher education in Colombia

Table 1 presents the general structure of higher education programs and qualifications in Colombia.

**Table 1.** Summary of the education system in Colombia

Age	Levels	Categoría		CINE (ISCED) 2011	Non-formal education
		<i>Undergraduate</i> <i>Graduate</i>			
19 and over	Higher Education		Doctorate (4 to 5 years)	8	
			Master's degree in deepening or research. (2 years)	7	
			Medical and surgical specialization (1 a 5 years)		
			University specialization (1 year)	6	
		University professional (4 to 5 years)			
	Technologist (3 years)	Technological specialization (1 year)	5		
	University professional (4 to 5 years)	Professional technical specialization (1 year)			
	Not applicable	Some ETDH programs		4	
17 and 18	Secondary	Technical intermediate (2 years)	Academic intermediate (2 years)	3	ETDH programs can be placed at levels 1 to 4
7 to 16	Basic education	Basic secondary (4 years)		2	
		Basic primary (5 years)		1	
6		Preschool (minimum 1 mandatory year)		0	
0 to 5		Kinder Garden (not mandatory)			

*Note:* In Colombia, what was once called non-formal education, was renamed education for work and human development in 2006 (ETDH in Spanish). This form of education is offered by the National Training Service (SENA in Spanish) and by nearly 4,000 private institutions. In Colombia, HEIs can also offer ETDH if they meet the official requirements. ETDH is not part of higher education *stricto sensu*; but it is part of the overall training system.



In Colombia, there are currently four types of higher education institutions (hereinafter, HEIs): professional technical institutions, technological institutions, university institutions and universities. All of them must be non-profit, and are regulated by the Ministry of National Education.

Regarding the distribution of enrolled students, about half are in public HEIs (51% in 2019) and half in private HEIs (49% in 2019). For more than a decade, the number of students enrolled in the Colombian higher education system has increased steadily (exceeding two million today). In the last three years, although the number of institutions and programs that have obtained high-quality accreditation has increased considerably, overall enrollment in the system has also decreased, a fact that calls for reflection on conditions of access to higher education in the country. Moreover, it is necessary to review how equity is being affected by these changes, especially if it is considered that the rate of transition from secondary to higher education in Colombia still does not exceed 50% of secondary school graduates.

For the past eight years, there has been a steady decrease in the annual dropout rate in higher education in the country. The rate of inter-semester absence<sup>3</sup> (students who leave and then return to the system) has also grown, especially in the professional technical programs.

Comparative data from 2010 to 2018 also reveal that students from lower socioeconomic groups tend to drop out more frequently. While significant progress has been made for the poorest groups, the situation of the middle-lower stratum groups deteriorated during the period. No national data are available on students from indigenous or other underrepresented groups, and information on students with disabilities is limited.

There are important differences in the completion rate concerning gender, rural-urban areas, socio-economic stratum and ethnicity. Likewise, the low level of educational training of the population with disabilities is one of the factors that affects their access to the formal<sup>4</sup> labor market.

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<sup>3</sup> Since 2018, MEN differentiates the *annual dropout rate* (ADT) from a new indicator called the *inter-semester absence rate* (IAS) (MEN, 2020, paragraph. 2).

<sup>4</sup> Only 4% of the population registered in the RLCPD (Registry for the Location and Characterization of Persons with Disabilities), reported having achieved and completed technical, technological or university education.

Although there are more women enrolled in higher education, female unemployment is also higher after degree completion [DANE], 2020. Women's participation in academic positions is low, at 36% in the period 2015-2020. The gap is even greater when it comes to leadership positions: four-fifths of university presidents are men.





Photograph:

News Agency  
(Unimedios)





Photograph:

Universidad Autónoma de Occidente

## 3. Government policies to promote equity

The Ministry of National Education (MEN) is responsible for managing and supervising all stages of human capital formation in Colombia, although some of the regions with the highest population density have assumed a growing role in higher education, especially to ensure equity in access and student success<sup>5</sup>.

The development plans of the last governments in Colombia have advocated for strengthening inclusion and quality in higher education through resources and incentives that have evolved according to the approach provided by each government. Despite the differences, the constant of all Colombian development plans in the twenty-first century has been the increase in coverage, number of programs and HEIs with high quality accreditation.

### 3.1. Financial instruments for the promotion of equity

Public spending on higher education in Colombia was 1% of GDP in 2018. Public HEIs have two main sources of financing to supplement the Government's budget contribution: 1) tuition fees and 2) income generated by research and consultancy contracts and donations. This greatly varies in each case since the distribution of public resources among public HEIs is very unequal. In the same way, there are big differences in terms of fees and spending levels in private universities.

The Colombian Government uses three main financing instruments to promote equity in higher education: 1) a system of subsidized student loans for the payment of tuition at public or private universities, 2) various

<sup>5</sup> For example, Sapiencia – Medellín Higher Education Agency– or, in the case of Bogotá, the recently created District Agency for Higher Education, Science and Technology –in December 2020– and their corresponding undersecretaries of higher education.

scholarship programs, and 3) grants to help students in need with their living expenses. Scholarships and grants are called *non-repayable loans*. All of them are administered by the Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad (ICETEX, in Spanish), the first ever student loan agency in the world.

Between 2010 and 2019, the total student population that benefited from an ICETEX loan grew from 19% to 31%. Few mortgage-type student loan systems in the world have reached such a high share. However, during the same period, the quantity of beneficiaries enrolled in technical and technological institutions fell from 22% to 2.9%.

ICETEX, with technical assistance from Australia, was in the process of migrating to an income-dependent lending scheme. However, this process was halted by the current government on the ground that more work was needed to review its feasibility.

In addition to student loans, ICETEX administers several scholarship and subsidy programs on behalf of the Ministries of Education and Culture, public enterprises such as Ecopetrol, regional departments and municipalities<sup>6</sup>; and entities of the private sector, among which are the Comunidades Negras<sup>7</sup> Fund, the Álvaro Ulcué Chocué<sup>8</sup> Fund and the Fund for the Reparation of Victims<sup>9</sup>.

In 2015, the government introduced the *Ser Pilo Paga*<sup>10</sup> scholarship program, aimed at students from the lowest socio-economic groups with excellent academic results. This program funded 37,505 students until 2018 when the program was closed by the new government. It was a very controversial program due to its high cost, negative impact on ICETEX, differences in benefits among public and private universities, and the high debts with which the students who dropped out were left. Data show that each beneficiary student of a *Ser Pilo Paga* scholarship received an amount of government subsidies equivalent to what 20 beneficiaries of ICETEX loans and 60 beneficiaries of the Generation E for Equity program received together, the latter being the program that replaced the *Ser Pilo Paga* program in 2019. Generation E program has two versions: Generation E for Equality and Generation E for Excellence.

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<sup>6</sup> At present, Colombia is territorially organized by departments, municipalities and districts, mainly. Other special divisions are provinces, indigenous territorial entities and collective territories.

<sup>7</sup> Established to support young people belonging to Afro-Colombian or black communities. Between 2010 and 2020, this fund awarded scholarships to 22,630 students.

<sup>8</sup> Between 2010 and 2020, it awarded 16,856 scholarships to members of indigenous populations.

<sup>9</sup> Aimed at students from displaced and demobilized groups. Between 2013 and 2020, 6,797 people benefited.

<sup>10</sup> The word *pilo* in Colombia refers to an 'intelligent person', a 'good student'.

## 3.2. Non-monetary policies to promote equity

To complement its financial policies in favor of needy students, the Colombian Government has also implemented several non-monetary strategies to promote equity. The main strategies of this type are 1) outreach and bridge programs to improve the articulation of upper secondary schools with HEIs; 2) Higher Education Regional Centers (CERES, in Spanish)<sup>11</sup> where HEIs, local authorities and employers join forces and resources to offer quality programmes in regions where the supply of higher education is insufficient or non-existent and communities are marginalized; and 3) the model of comprehensive student attention, whose purpose is to increase the chances of success for vulnerable students through economic, social and academic support measures<sup>12</sup>.

In practice, however, most of initiatives aimed at improving access and retention, in addition to financial support, come from the HEIs themselves, as discussed in the next section.

## 3.3. Promoting inclusion in higher education in Colombia

In its Constitution, Colombia defines itself as a multicultural and multi-ethnic country that recognizes the rights and guarantees of special protection, minority and historically discriminated population groups<sup>13</sup> population victim of the armed conflict, border population and populations that require special protection<sup>14</sup> (MEN and Fundación Saldarriaga Concha, 2016).

Since the 90s, and especially since the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Government and HEIs have generated policies and actions

<sup>11</sup> There are 141 such centers across the country, offering 748 academic programs and enrolling about 28,761 students. However, policies of the last two administrations have led to this modality vanishing due to the lack of technical and financial support from the national government, so only those that have had the will and support from local authorities still survive. Based on the analysis carried out on the functioning and results of CERES centers and rural alliances of education and development (ARED), MEN has initiated the design of a strategy of higher education nodes (MEN, 2020b, p. 154).

<sup>12</sup> During the last administrations, this model has been left to the discretion of universities, so that it is no longer a joint work of the Ministry of Education and ICETEX.

<sup>13</sup> Population with disabilities; indigenous ethnic groups; black, Afro-Colombian and Raizal communities; Palenquero and Rom villages.

<sup>14</sup> The following categories include: women, children, adolescents, the elderly, human rights defenders, pregnant and lactating women, waste pickers, mothers who are heads of households, LGBTQIA people, homeless people, people living with HIV/AIDS and the prison population.



for a more inclusive higher education system, in a country that still faces important challenges in terms of equality, equity and peace.

Although efforts have been made to generate guidelines for inclusive education in higher education since 2010, to date, there is no official national report that allows monitoring of the situation in this regard.



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## 4. Policies for the promotion of equity at the institutional level

The ten HEIs that participated in this study<sup>15</sup> have defined equity objectives and formulated policies and measures to achieve them. In the formulation and execution of their institutional policies for equity, these universities include two or more aspects considered central, such as: a specific equity policy strategy document; the definition of equity target population groups; the existence of a unit dedicated to promoting equity; and a comprehensive monitoring system for equity policy.

The case studies demonstrate the range of financing instruments and non-monetary measures used to complement the Colombian Government's national policies in this area. All participating universities, public and private, offer scholarships to support low-income students. Some private institutions have their own student loans to supplement government financial aid. UNIMINUTO targets students from underrepresented groups, offering them a low tuition rate and its own student loans through a cooperative micro financing program.

The ten institutions analyzed are very active in the area of retention, as high levels of dropouts are one of the biggest challenges faced by Colombian universities (OECD<sup>16</sup>, 2016). These interventions are carried out through outreach and bridge programmes, preferential admission, regional campuses, and dedicated retention programmes.

In the group of HEIs among the case studies, private universities tend to have a slightly lower proportion of women enrolled, compared to public ones. This may indicate that the cost of tuition could be a stronger impediment for young women than for young males. The data also indicate that almost all HEIs in the studied group show better labor market than the national average,

<sup>15</sup> Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios—UNIMINUTO, Universidad Autónoma de Occidente (UAO), Universidad Católica de Manizales (UCM), Universidad de Antioquia, Universidad de los Andes, Universidad del Magdalena, Universidad del Valle, EAFIT University, Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS) and Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

<sup>16</sup> Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

although variations are seen for some of these institutions, substantial from one year to the next. These variations tend to be more noticeable in the case of public universities than in private ones.

Each of the ten HEIs surveyed and analyzed has introduced a wide range of measures to attract and support more students from underrepresented groups and improve their chances of graduating. Full information on institutional equity policies, strategies, programmes and projects, with their respective results and analyses, appear in the full publication, which is available at [www.ascun.org.co](http://www.ascun.org.co). It is also possible to consult the information of each of the case studies in the links included in Annex 1.

In addition to the aforementioned policies, Colombia has experience in promoting partnerships between the public and private sectors, as well as the articulation of national and institutional policies in favor of the most vulnerable populations. An example to highlight is the one led by the Directorate of Protection of the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF, in Spanish)<sup>17</sup> and supported since 2012 by ASCUN, which has sought to promote access, permanence and graduation in higher education of young people who are under the administrative process of restoration of rights (PARD)<sup>18</sup>, those who are part of the System of Responsibility for Adolescents (SRPA)<sup>19</sup>. This project has supported more than 5,000 students from the time when they are in ninth or tenth grade until after graduation, either in higher education or in technical education, as preparation for the world of work. As a unique milestone in Latin America, articulation mechanisms have been implemented among more than 250 technical education institutions and IES in 90% of the national territory<sup>20</sup>).

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<sup>17</sup> ICBF, according to the information available on its website (<https://www.icbf.gov.co/instituto>), is “the entity of the Colombian State that works for the prevention and comprehensive protection of early childhood, childhood, adolescence and the well-being of families in Colombia, providing attention especially to those in conditions of threat, non-observance or violation of their rights, reaching about 3 million Colombians with its programs, strategies and care services with 33 regional headquarters and 215 zonal centers throughout the country.”

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, the document Procedure of the administrative process of restoration of rights, is available at <https://www.icbf.gov.co/procedimiento-del-proceso-administrativo-of-restoration-of-rights-v3>

<sup>19</sup> About the SRPA, the website <https://www.icbf.gov.co/bienestar/proteccion/> criminal responsibility is available.

<sup>20</sup> Detailed information about this program can be obtained at [www.ascun.org.co](http://www.ascun.org.co)



Photograph:

Universidad Industrial de  
Santander (UIS)





Photograph:

Universidad del Valle  
(UNIVALLE)

## 5. What works in the national context? The impact of equity policies

Several indicators point to an overall improvement in the equity profile of the Colombian Higher Education System in recent years. First, MEN statistics indicate that the transition rate from secondary to higher education has increased steadily. For example, between 2015 and 2017, it went from 37.4% to 42.7%. Based on the survey conducted, the main factors that would explain this progress would be a better-quality secondary education, effective academic counselling to inform and motivate high school graduates, and properly structured bridge programs. Secondly, the analysis of disparities by income quintiles reveals that, between 2010 and 2016, progress in Colombia has occurred at a faster rate than in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru.

In the absence of rigorous impact assessments, it is difficult to precisely identify which interventions have worked best and in what way. However, a number of evaluation reports are available to draw some conclusions about the effects of government policies and measures at the institutional level.

The first observation has to do with the crucial role played over the years by ICETEX, which has developed an effective targeting mechanism, aligned with its mission of promoting equity. The percentage of beneficiaries from the lowest socio-economic group almost doubled between 2010 and 2018, from 26% to 40% among all ICETEX beneficiaries. Overall, it contributed to a significant increase in access to higher education between 2003 and 2009 (from 31% to 42%). In addition, students who benefit from an ICETEX loan are 22% less likely to drop out than the general student population. At the same time, loan recipients get better grades and show higher graduation rates than other students. The admission rate is 15% higher in public universities and 9% higher in private universities (Econometrics, 2010).

An evaluation of CERES centers, carried out in 2013, yielded very positive results (Econometrics, 2013). In terms of access, 73% of CERES centers were located in municipalities that previously did not have any higher education provider, enrolling a majority of students from the poorest households. The quality of the programmes, as measured by the ICFES<sup>21</sup> tests, was equivalent to the national average. However, salaries earned by CERES graduates were 7.6% lower than the national average, which is understandable considering the lack of economic opportunities in the remote areas where CERES centers were established and the very nature of the program.

A 2017 evaluation of the *Ser Pilo Paga* program, using a discontinuity regression analysis, concluded that beneficiaries were 32% more likely to access higher education than non-beneficiaries in 2014, and 26% more likely in 2015 (Álvarez Rivadulla et al., 2017). The dropout rate was 6% lower during the first quarter of the first year of studies.

HEIs, on their own, have also been successful in selecting and attracting a growing number of students from disadvantaged groups. The ten institutions that were part of the case studies achieved a significant increase in the share of students from lower strata. This indicates that the combination of national student support policies and institutional equity policies has had a positive impact.

EAFIT, Autónoma de Occidente, Magdalena and UNIMINUTO universities have achieved very positive results in reducing dropout rates among the poorest students. This progress also confirms the importance of multi-pronged strategies for attracting and retaining low-income students. Likewise, Los Andes, Industrial de Santander, and Católica de Manizales universities made substantial progress in favor of equity.

Understanding the actual implementation of equity promotion measures by individual institutions can be useful to complement the analysis of government policies. It also provides relevant information on how

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21 The Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Higher Education, ICFES (formerly called the Colombian Institute for the Promotion of Higher Education) is a “state-owned social enterprise that offers education evaluation services at all levels (exams) of the State, carries out research on the factors that affect the quality of education, provides information that contributes to the improvement and decision-making in the quality of education and carries out other evaluation projects (standardized tests) in accordance with national and international standards required by public or private entities”. Currently, in Colombia, there are six State exams that are carried out during the process of formal education in Colombia: in grades 3rd and 5th of primary basic education, 9th of secondary education, 11th of high school, at the end of a program of professional or technological technical higher education and upon completion of a university undergraduate program. For more information on the structure of the Colombian educational system, the complete publication can be consulted in the link XXX).

universities can shape their own approach to improving equity. In this sense, UNIMINUTO and El Valle, Antioquia and Nacional de Colombia universities are exemplary case studies regarding the implementation of equity policy at the institutional level.

Finally, the coordinated ICBF-ASCUN program shows the possibility of generating results with a national impact. The program supported more than 200 institutions in a systemic and joint effort, operating in all regions of the country in favor of inclusion and equity in higher education. It is also a good example of a comprehensive strategy, helping young people before they start their higher education studies, accompanying them throughout their training pathway, and even providing support as graduates so that they can start an autonomous professional life with adequate tools for their successful employment stage. This is an example that could be emulated in other countries.







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## 6. What works in the international context in terms of national policies?

The five countries selected as case studies come from very different regions of the world, yet they share common characteristics and illustrate converging trends that suggest a number of relevant lessons.

### 6.1. General comments

*Need for impact studies:* There are very few rigorous impact studies to precisely establish what works and what does not. Even in Australia, whose comprehensive equity promotion policies can be considered as a model for many countries, there is a lack of impact studies. Reviews of the Impact Studies by the World Bank (Hebaut and Geven, 2019) and the Sutton Trust (Torgerson et al., 2014) revealed that most of those that are available come from the United States. Therefore, their relevance to other parts of the world may be limited, especially when it comes to developing countries, since the institutional context and characteristics of the student population are very different.

*Importance of robust databases:* The availability of relevant data to measure disparities and monitor the effects and consequences of equity promotion policies is insufficient. Austria, Colombia and Vietnam, for example, do not have publicly accessible national data on students' socio-economic background.

*Virtues of alignment:* A high degree of alignment between leadership, vision, policy objectives, policy instruments, and resources is critical to achieving good equity outcomes. Counting with resources in line with the national equity agenda is of particular importance. For example, Colombia has a successful and effective student loan agency but, in recent years, the government has cut its budgetary resources substantially, thereby limiting its ability to reach all students in need of financial assistance..

*Political continuity:* The need for continuity in equity policies is a lesson from countries' experiences. Country studies illustrate how partisan politics often get in the way of sound policy-making. To improve access and success for underrepresented groups in the long term, it is important to stay the course and continue policies to consistently promote equity—financial and non-monetary—, regardless of political changes. Colombia has particularly suffered from policy changes from one government to another. As a result, some measures have departed from the main political orientation, as illustrated by the introduction of *Ser Pilo Paga*. Even though it had some merit on its own, it was implemented without taking into account the role of ICETEX and ended up undermining the availability of resources for the majority of poor students supported by ICETEX.

*Governance model:* the relationship between university autonomy and government policies to promote equity largely defines the incentives that HEIs can use to undertake initiatives on their own. Universities with greater autonomy tend to be more successful in implementing outreach and retention programs than those which are more strictly bound by government controls.

*Structural characteristics:* Four structural elements influence the extent and magnitude of disparities in higher education: 1) the development of the basic and secondary education system and degree of transition between general and vocational education training in this system; 2) the level of selectivity in the admission policies of universities; 3) the degree of institutional differentiation of higher education systems, and 4) the availability of financial aid for students from disadvantaged groups.

*Institutional diversification:* Country studies point out two aspects that should be considered: 1) a high quantity of non-university institutions is not always a favorable development from the point of view of equity. South Africa and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam and Colombia, show that disadvantaged students end up predominantly in less prestigious and lower quality non-university institutions. Therefore, institutional diversification works well only if there are flexible pathways to facilitate mobility between subsectors, as is to some extent the case in Canada and the United States with community colleges;

2) having a high number of students enrolled in private institutions can have adverse equity consequences, unless there is a solid policy of student aid, as in the case of Colombia, where scholarships and student loans are available to give low-income students the opportunity to study at private universities. Lack of adequate financial aid means that students from underrepresented groups are discouraged from enrolling in private institutions.

## 6.2. Financing policies

*Financing instruments:* The income-contingent student loan system provides a dimension of long-term financial sustainability that very few countries enjoy (e.g., Australia).

*Equity criteria for allocating HEI resources:* A relatively small number of countries use a funding formula that incorporates equity-related criteria to allocate public resources to higher education.

*Student Loan system:* All five countries have a student loan system, but student loans only play an important role in Australia and Colombia.

*Free tuition:* The introduction of targeted free tuition in South Africa is a fairly recent development that was reported by the 2018 Lumina study. This approach is potentially more equitable but poses a major challenge for the government, given the need to allocate sufficient budgetary resources to finance this measure.

## 6.3. Non-monetary policies

*Implemented by the HEIs themselves:* The five case studies illustrate the fact that non-monetary policies implemented by HEIs themselves are very effective at promoting access and success for students from disadvantaged groups. Colombia and South Africa are two countries where HEIs have taken many initiatives for inclusion and achievement of higher graduation rates for students from underrepresented groups. While all five countries pay close attention to non-monetary equity policy instruments, only Australia and South Africa have dedicated resources to support the work of HEIs in this area.

*Gender balance:* While all five countries have achieved gender equity in terms of student enrollment, they have found it difficult to close the gap in terms of gender equality in STEM<sup>22</sup> institutions and programs, as well as in the top academic and managerial positions at HEIs.

*Students with disabilities:* The studies confirmed the difficulties encountered by countries and institutions in assessing and meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

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<sup>22</sup> The acronym STEM, from the English Language, refers to education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (*science, technology, engineering and mathematics*).

## 6.4. Institutional policies

The evaluation of institutional approaches to promote access and success for underrepresented students in the five countries case studies has revealed a number of good practices:

*Equity Strategy:* Having a clear strategy, which can be a stand-alone document or be embedded in the institutional strategic plan, allows HEIs to mobilize their community and stakeholders around shared goals to improve equity.

*Responsible unit:* Having a department or unit responsible for all equity-related activities under the direct authority of an institutional leader is also an important success factor.

*Partnerships between HEIs and businesses:* In low and middle-income countries, partnerships between HEIs and businesses can generate additional resources to fund scholarships for students in need.

*Scaling institutional practices up:* Sometimes, good practices implemented by a single institution can be emulated by other institutions or by the Government itself to design and implement national strategies. Colombia provided several examples in that respect.

*First-generation students at elite universities:* The Colombia, South Africa and Vietnam case studies showed a special challenge faced by elite public and private universities interested in becoming more inclusive. Beyond ensuring greater access for traditionally underrepresented students through outreach and affirmative action programs, it is equally important to provide a welcoming environment for first-generation students, who may feel uncomfortable when the institutional culture is heavily influenced by the social norms of students from privileged families. It is therefore essential to provide adequate support and a favorable socio-cultural environment.



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## 7. Impact of COVID-19 on higher education in the world and in Colombia from an equity perspective

The scale of the current COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in the twenty-first century. Barely a year after its spread, more than 100 million people had been infected and more than three million had died worldwide. Since February 2020, in one country after another, partial or total lockdowns were decreed. The closure of university and college campuses, the disruption of face-to-face activities and the abrupt shift to remote learning affected more than 150 million students across the world. The impact has been particularly serious for students from vulnerable groups in low-income countries. This chapter documents the impact of this situation on institutions, students and teachers in Colombia, as well as aspects that need to be considered in the measurement of equity policies.

### 7.1. What do students and teachers at Colombian universities tell us about COVID-19?

In the absence of official data regarding the direct impact of Covid in Colombian universities, ASCUN carried out a series of consultations to collect information on what has happened in the sector.

In May 2020, the first perception consultation was held with university rectors, whose responses ranged from pessimistic and moderate scenarios (very few optimistic) for the rest of the year and for 2021, as a result of the pandemic and reflecting on the likely equity impact. Overall, it was felt that there would be a significant decline in enrollment, especially of new students, and significant budget reallocation to offset new expenses linked to the transition from on-campus to virtual teaching, as well as possible reductions in revenue.



In many cases, HEIs had to reallocate expenditures linked to student welfare to compensate for the need to acquire computers and provide connectivity that students needed to be able to continue with their home-based training. The necessary actions were implemented to provide the teaching staff with the platforms and support required for this new modality of work. In some HEIs, partial or full tuition discounts were offered (the latter in some public HEIs), which generated additional expenditures and, in some cases, created cash flow difficulties.

Although the most pressing item was student retention and expansion of opportunities for new students, HEIs also had to guarantee work continuity for their employees. The survey found that about one million jobs depended directly or indirectly on HEIs and that the impact of the crisis would be felt for at least five more years.

ASCUN conducted two more consultations, one with students and one with teachers. In particular, it sought to inquire about everyday life aspects that had been impacted by the pandemic, looking in particular at physical and mental health, socioeconomic conditions, technological equipment and opinions on remote training through technologies<sup>23</sup>. 15,841 students and 5,546 teachers from all regions of the country participated in these surveys, an unprecedented participation in the history of the Association<sup>24</sup>. The students and teachers who participated in the surveys reported the following effects of the pandemic:

1. A widespread perception of declining household income, for students especially. This led to half of those consulted reporting that they had to look for employment (not always successfully), return to their places of origin and seek economic support for equipment, data plans, subsidies, or any other governmental or institutional support to continue with their education. Faced with this situation, the national government and HEIs made progress in identifying the needs of the student population and in providing aid of different kinds
2. Before the quarantine, 76% of the teachers surveyed had only offered in-person classes.
3. 89% of the teachers consulted said that they had to devote more time to the preparation of online classes. At the same time, the demand on their

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<sup>23</sup> The survey on students was carried out in May, and that of the teachers, in June 2020, two and three months after the confinement measures had begun, respectively.

<sup>24</sup> Full results of the surveys with students and teachers can be found at: [www.ascun.org.co/noticias/detalle/percepciones-universitarias](http://www.ascun.org.co/noticias/detalle/percepciones-universitarias) and [www.ascun.org.co/noticias/detalle/percepciones-university-from-the-perspective-of-the-teachers-792](http://www.ascun.org.co/noticias/detalle/percepciones-university-from-the-perspective-of-the-teachers-792), respectively.

time to accompany their own children or other relatives who were also in remote education and for domestic chores increased, with the consequent drastic decrease in leisure time.

4. 62% of teachers said they had a good management of remote classes, although they recognize the need to update themselves in the use of platforms and learn more about tools for virtual education. In some cases, however, the pandemic experience has meant a profound revision of their pedagogical approach.
5. Among the different strategies used, students and teachers agreed that they mostly relied on synchronous online meetings for teaching in real time.
6. Only 30% of the students surveyed said that they were able to access all synchronous spaces; 39%, most of the time; 22%, only some times, and 6% none. Access to asynchronous materials shows a similar pattern.
7. The perception among students and teachers about various academic aspects of this situation is quite different. It is possible to find a more positive perception among teachers, while there is in general a more critical perception on the part of students. However, both students and teachers consider that what has been most adversely affected were the teaching and learning processes, and that what has improved the most is the flexibility of teachers.

#### Mental and physical health aspects:

- In general, the perception of one's own health is more positive among teachers than among students. Among the possible health conditions that can be affected, 11% of students mentioned mental health problems (compared to only 3% of teachers who said that they suffered that condition). As for their moods, in both cases they have felt greater tiredness and fears for their own lives and those of their relatives. Feelings of irritability, isolation and loneliness are also widespread among students.
- Daily activities of students and teachers were affected at the beginning of the lockdown measures taken because of COVID-19. The situation improved as the months passed, and especially in terms of eating and sleeping. However, significant negative effects still persisted. For teachers, recreational, leisure, and physical activities were particularly affected. Students, in addition to these, saw important effects on daily routines, food and sleep.
- Although communication with family and partners was maintained or increased, students and teachers saw a significant decrease in their communication with friends, peers and teachers from the higher education institution.

- About 60% of the students said that the motivation to study decreased, and 40% that their autonomy was reduced. Among teachers, however, the majority considered that both their motivation and autonomy remained the same or even improved.
- The year 2021 has begun with uncertainty, although universities have already completed the changes required to respond to their missionary functions through remote, alternative, blended and face-to-face modalities.

## 7.2. Key messages and policy lessons from international analysis

An international study on the impact of the pandemic on universities, carried out between March and October 2020 by the Lumina Foundation, identified global trends regarding the impact of Covid-19 on higher education in the short and long terms, especially for underrepresented groups (Salmi, 2020). The information included in the analysis makes it possible to establish main offers a number of messages and policy lessons at the national and institutional levels, which also apply to the Colombian case.

### *Principal Messages*

- The pandemic has forced the interruption of face-to-face education on campuses in most countries around the world. Very few HEIs had planned and prepared for situations like these. Higher education institutions and students have experienced unprecedented disruption and new challenges, such as internet access, online classes, studying in overcrowded families, among others.
- Many institutions managed to switch to online education very quickly, and have done their best to provide continuity in teaching.
- It is a myth that COVID-19 has been a great factor of equality. The digital divide and lack of instructor preparation have exacerbated disparities in access and success, and created social distress, especially among vulnerable students.
- In the medium to long term, COVID-19 is likely to have negative effects on the learning outcomes, graduation rates, employability and job prospects of traditionally underrepresented students and on the often-precarious financial situation of higher education institutions.
- Moving to online education has created opportunities for a meaningful transformation of students' learning experience, whether online or on campus. Curricular and pedagogical practices could be reformed to promote active, interactive and experiential education, supported by

aligned innovations in assessment and more flexible learning pathways and qualifications.

- Substantial changes in the economic model of higher education systems and institutions are needed to increase their resilience. Systems with higher levels of public financing and provision are less vulnerable to economic and health crises. A strong IT infrastructure and consistent student support programs (grants and income-dependent loans) are indispensable for fostering inclusion.
- Higher education institutions need to integrate risk analysis and contingency planning more systematically. Comprehensive support (financial, academic and psychological) for vulnerable students and faculty is needed to promote inclusion and reduce inequalities.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, many HEIs have made a tremendous public good contribution through medical research, dissemination of scientific evidence, and direct assistance to governments and local communities to combat the pandemic.

### *Policy lessons at the national level*

- COVID-19 financial aid packages should protect employment in the higher education sector and provide emergency financial aid to all students in need.
- Public funding for higher education should prioritize short training programs with flexible trajectories and a scaffolding of credentials, such as those offered by community colleges and technical institutes, as they provide opportunities for many low-income and minority students and can play an important role in driving economic recovery through relevant training in close collaboration with employers.
- Countries whose higher education institutions have a high level of financial dependence on tuition-paying students, especially international students, should work to reduce this element of vulnerability.
- Student aid systems that include mortgage-type student loans should consider switching to income-contingent loans.
- Research funding agencies should encourage open science and collaborative projects between institutions and countries that can share talent and resources to foster cooperation and multidisciplinary in solving major societal challenges.
- In developing countries, where internet access is unequal and costly, governments must strengthen broadband infrastructure and bridge the digital divide among higher education institutions and students.

- Ministries in charge of higher education should implement strategies to ensure institutional capacity building for high-quality online teaching, learning and assessment.
- Assessment methods and quality assurance approaches need to be made more flexible in the face of difficulties faced by higher education institutions and their students.

### *Policy lessons at the institutional level*

1. Having a well-developed and experienced teaching and learning services department is a great advantage to facilitate the transition to online education and introduce innovative curricular and pedagogical practices.
2. Professional networks inside and outside higher education institutions are important platforms to support instructors struggling to adapt to online education.
3. Effective governance during the pandemic involves compassion from leaders, flexibility in management, and delegation of decision-making to empower all academic and administrative actors.
4. Implementing a clear communication strategy increases the level of awareness and sense of belonging among the entire academic community in times of crisis.
5. The disruptive effects of the COVID-19 crisis reinforce the need for more systematic risk analysis and the implementation of mitigation measures as part of strategic planning.
6. In preparation for the post-pandemic era, leaders of higher education institutions must define a bold vision based on opportunities to accelerate the introduction of innovative approaches to reimagine the educational and business models of higher education institutions.
7. Effective support for vulnerable students requires a comprehensive set of measures to support their financial, technological, educational and health needs.
8. In the post-pandemic era, higher education institutions must welcome adult learners as an essential component of their target student population, offering appropriate programs that meet their learning needs.



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(Unimedios)





Photograph:

Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS)

## 8. Conclusion

*What is not defined cannot be measured.  
What is not measured, cannot be improved. What is not improved, always deteriorates.*

LORD KELVIN, British physicist and mathematician (1824-1907)

This book is the first comprehensive study on national and institutional equity policies in higher education in Colombia. It offers not only a detailed analysis of these policies and their impact, but is also complemented by international comparisons that provide an additional perspective that is also relevant to understand the important achievements obtained in Colombia, as well as the challenges the country faces. The international perspective makes it possible to consider the limitations of existing policies and identify areas where efforts need to be improved, at the level of both national and institutional policies. Finally, the study constitutes a for stimulating exchanges of experiences and dialogue on lessons learned, that could be useful for the Colombian national authorities and the leadership teams of all higher educational institutions. The following paragraphs are a synthesis of strengths and challenges, as well as a series of general and specific recommendations to guide national and institutional policies for the promotion of equity in Colombian higher education.

### 8.1. Strengths

- Colombia has a normative framework aimed at guaranteeing equity and inclusion, with the purpose of guaranteeing access and permanence of all groups in its widely diverse population (Palenqueros, Afro-Colombians, Raizales, Rom, indigenous) and all groups in conditions of vulnerability (women, LGBTQIA, people in situations of disability, victims of the armed conflict, rurally-dispersed and hard-to-reach population in a situation of poverty).
- HEIs, particularly those of an official/public nature, but also private ones, have innovated in the design and operationalization of strategies, programs, and instruments, both financial and non-financial, to serve the various population groups in the process of equity/inclusion.



- Colombia has achieved an impressive expansion of enrollment over the past two decades, with a higher participation of low-income and minority students. The greater presence of public and private universities in the regions, through face-to-face, distance and virtual programs, has substantially helped.
- ICETEX, the first student loan agency in the world, has been one of the main instruments for promoting equity at the national level, effectively helping to increase access and reducing dropout through subsidized loans, living expense subsidies, and targeted scholarships.
- The country has greatly benefited from ICETEX' expertise in the design and implementation of financial products (short/medium/long term loans, grant-loans, subsidies) and trust funds (strategic alliances with national or regional entities), to provide universities with adequate funding to guarantee students' access to and success in higher education.
- The Ministry of Education has implemented SPADIES<sup>25</sup>, a comprehensive and innovative information system that offers a large amount of data on the characteristics of students in the system, which helps higher education institutions monitor dropout levels, identify contributing factors, and design appropriate strategies to improve retention.
- The main public universities have strategies and structures dedicated to equity promotion interventions through financial aid and non-monetary instruments. Some private universities have also used government incentives (loans, scholarships) and their own resources to undertake important equity-related activities and implement retention programs in support of vulnerable students.
- The Colombian Government has included new target groups of equity to recognize victims of violence, displaced population groups and gender diversity, among others.
- Decentralized public agencies at the level of departments and municipalities, working in partnerships with HEIs and associations such as ASCUN have complemented the equity work of the national Government to improve the access and success of students from vulnerable groups.

## 8.2. Challenges

- Public resources available for equity promotion programmes are largely insufficient. In addition, criteria by which budgetary transfers are distributed or their direct relationship to the promotion of equity are unclear.

- Colombia has been characterized by a lack of continuity in equity policies from one government to another, which has often generated new programs, undermining the level of resources that go to ICETEX and diminishing the credibility of the equity programs of the Government.
- In Colombia, there is no unified definition of low-income students. The existence of different scales has made it difficult to target maintenance loans and grants provided by ICETEX. Another complication in reaching vulnerable students is the fact that minority students (indigenous, disabled) are identified based on self-reports without consolidated national figures on these populations or other vulnerable groups.
- Much of academic difficulties faced by students from underrepresented groups at the higher education level are due to the poor quality of secondary education.
- Technical and technological institutions, where many low-income students enroll, receive low budget support from the national government.
- The expertise and results obtained by HEIs in equity/inclusion programs/instruments must be capitalized by the Colombian Government to promote, disseminate and finance/co-finance them.
- The Colombian Government must capitalize on the expertise of ICETEX and HEIs to restructure the policy, programs and instruments of equity/ inclusion for the various population groups at risk or conditions of vulnerability.
- Although there is a normative framework and guidelines/guidelines on equity and educational inclusion in higher education, its impact on the access, permanence and success of the poor/poorest population, ethnic groups, population residing in rural areas/difficult to access, and victims of the armed conflict, in a situation of disability or sexually diverse, is limited.
- Comprehensive policies to promote equity at the level of higher education are not sufficient to compensate for the structural inequalities that come from secondary education.
- The current state of indebtedness of the public/official University, together with the lack of a clear and forceful policy for its strengthening and the defunding, puts at risk the efforts and achievements completed in equity/inclusion material.
- The elements of gender inequality present in admission processes, on the labor market, the low degree of success of women in the basic sciences/engineering, as well as the harassment/discrimination by teachers and peers require strategic and financial attention in order to overcome current deficiencies that have been previously investigated and denounced, but not forcefully acted upon.

- Deficiencies in articulation between secondary, technical, technological and university education affect the access and continuity of the higher education training process.
- It is a challenge for the country to put in place an articulated National Qualifications System, in such a way that it serves as a mechanism to identify training needs, different ways of qualification in higher and vocational education and their articulation with possible fields of performance.
- Although the Ministry of Education has three publicly accessible and interactive information systems (SNIES<sup>26</sup>, SPADIES<sup>27</sup>, OLE<sup>28</sup>), they are still incomplete and often out of date to provide relevant information in a disaggregated and detailed way about the equity target groups and the impact of equity promotion policies. This makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to monitor progress and assess the impact of such policies.

### 8.3. General recommendations

- National and institutional equity policies must be defined in a comprehensive manner, considering both financial and non-monetary aspects, coordinating actions at the national, territorial and institutional levels in a complementary way, and placing emphasis on both access and success, the former having traditionally received more attention.
- It is important to conduct impact studies to measure which interventions and combinations of interventions are most effective in a more systematic and rigorous manner.
- Proper monitoring of equity promotion policies requires well-established information systems to identify all equity groups and measure progress in terms of access and graduation.
- More work is needed across institutions to identify and evaluate effective policies to improve gender balance in STEM programs, in the highest academic positions, and in university leadership roles.
- Higher priority should be given to addressing the needs of students with disabilities, providing sufficient resources, and empowering higher education institutions to place this dimension high on their equity agenda.
- It is very important to generate spaces for dialogue and articulation among the different education levels (secondary / higher, universities / non-university institutions).

<sup>26</sup> National Higher Education Information System (<https://snies.mineduacion.gov.co>).

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.mineduacion.gov.co/sistemasinfo/spadies>

<sup>28</sup> Labor Observatory for Education (<https://ole.mineduacion.gov.co>).

- The existing diversity in the provision of higher education programs should be advertised more widely and promoted in a balanced way.
- Effective policies and instruments in support of equity should be disseminated among all government entities, HEIs, associations, networks and groups of HEIs, as well as other stakeholders.

## 8.4. Specific recommendations

- The Colombian Government needs to define a sustainable financing strategy for higher education, introducing criteria linked to equity in the allocation of budgetary resources to all higher education institutions. Such funding should promote the financial and quality sustainability of HEIs, allocate more resources to support ICETEX and government programs that have demonstrated a positive effect on equity, adequately fund technical and technological institutes, and support initiatives of HEIs and non-governmental organizations focused on greater equity in higher education.
- It is essential to maintain the continuity of general higher education policies and specific policies to promote equity, moving from opportunistic government policies to long-term state policies.
- Colombia should adopt a single definition of low-income students that can be applied across the country and across all public agencies.
- Efforts should be maintained to improve the quality of secondary education, reducing disparities among high schools.
- Although Colombia has a relatively well-developed information system for higher education, there is a need for greater compatibility and connection between existing databases (SNIES, SPADIES, OLE), as well as coherence among data produced by universities and those published at the national level.
- HEIs should be encouraged to systematically monitor and evaluate their equity promotion initiatives.
- An appropriate platform is needed to allow territorial entities and Colombian higher education institutions to share good practices and lessons from experience on their programs and measures for the promotion of equity.



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# Annex

- ANNEX 1.** Template to analyze national policies and mechanisms to promote equity in higher education.
- ANNEX 2.** Template for conducting the survey of universities in each of the five countries.
- ANNEX 3.** Case study Universidad de Antioquia.
- ANNEX 4.** Case study Universidad de los Andes.
- ANNEX 5.** Case study Universidad Autónoma de Occidente.
- ANNEX 6.** Case study Universidad Católica de Manizales.
- ANNEX 7.** Case study Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios-UNIMINUTO.
- ANNEX 8.** Case study Universidad EAFIT.
- ANNEX 9.** Case study Universidad Industrial de Santander - Asociación Colombiana de Universidades.
- ANNEX 10.** Case study Universidad del Magdalena.
- ANNEX 11.** Case study Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- ANNEX 12.** Case study Universidad del Valle.







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