

# EDUCATIONAL REFORMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON ACCESS TO PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION IN ECUADOR

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## ABSTRACT

The issue of access to higher education in Ecuador has been the subject of considerable criticism and debate in recent years. The present research is aimed at identifying the perspective of applicants in the face of the last two access reforms adopted by the central government. To this end, a methodological route was applied that began with a documentary analysis and a transversal approach. Due to its nature, the research is mixed qualitative-quantitative, descriptive and explanatory. The principal findings indicate that the gross enrolment rate, or the extent of access to higher education, is relatively low, with figures ranging between 30% and 38%. At the time of the research, at least 37% of respondents had not succeeded in accessing higher education, despite having attempted it on more than three occasions. Among those who were excluded, 39% did not meet the minimum grade requirement, while 28% did achieve the minimum grade but were unable to access higher education due to a lack of available places.

**Keywords:** Higher education, access, educational reforms.

## Resumen

El acceso a la Educación Superior en Ecuador ha sido objeto de críticas y debates en los últimos años. La presente investigación se orienta a identificar la perspectiva de los aspirantes frente a las dos últimas reformas de acceso adoptadas por el gobierno central, para efecto se aplicó una ruta metodológica que inició con un análisis documental y enfoque transversal, por su naturaleza es mixta cuali-cuantitativa, descriptiva y explicativa. Los principales resultados reflejan que la tasa bruta de matrícula es decir el acceso a la educación superior es relativamente baja oscila entre el 30% y el 38%, al menos el 37% de encuestados hasta la fecha de la investigación no logró acceder a la educación superior a pesar de tener más de tres intentos, el 39% de los que se encuentran excluidos no obtuvo la nota mínima requerida y el 28% alcanzó la nota, pero no lograron acceder por falta de cupos.

**Palabras clave:** Educación superior, acceso, reformas educativas.

## INTRODUCTION

The right to education is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948. This declaration mandates that all human

beings, without exception, must have access to a quality and inclusive education system. Access to and permanence in education are two terms that must inevitably be considered together. In order to guarantee access, it is essential to ensure equity. The role of the state is therefore of paramount importance, as it must implement corrective or compensatory measures that regulate situations of inequality and reduce the figures of social gaps. It must also address the issue of illiteracy. It is crucial to remember that all people should have the possibility of accessing an educational system that meets their needs, expectations and life project, and that they should be able to complete their studies successfully.

“The right to education must be founded upon principles of equity and quality. In the absence of these, the indispensable instrument of human progress towards the ideals of peace, freedom, and social justice would be placed in jeopardy” (Fontán, 2015, p. 13). In this way, the author posits that education is an inherent aspect of human action, and thus a means of achieving comprehensive development across all dimensions.

In Ecuadorian legislation, education is recognized as a system of quality and warmth, of access, and as an inalienable right in the 2008 Constitution. This signifies that education must be inclusive, with open access for all people without exclusion and with equity, considering the universal free approach up to the third level of public education. In this sense, free education has been a pivotal factor in facilitating access to the education system for underprivileged and marginalized socioeconomic groups.

It is beyond dispute that public policy, in its determination to enhance the quality of higher education in all its dimensions, has implemented reforms that address the needs and circumstances of the Ecuadorian higher education system. These reforms are designed to achieve justice, equity, inclusion, increased access, and free education, with the objective of reducing the current socioeconomic gap. In this regard, the most recent reforms represent a significant departure from previous iterations, as they have undergone multiple modifications, analyses, critiques, and discussions concerning access, meritocracy, and equal opportunities.

The question thus arises as to whether it is feasible to enhance access to higher education through the reforms implemented by the central government. To address this question, this research initially considers the outcomes of access to higher education over the past five years, as reported by the National Secretariat of Education. The following section will examine the perspective of applicants for a quota in higher education, focusing on the access mechanism that consists of an exam applied by the body in charge at the national level that measures knowledge and skills. This is in contrast to an exam established at the discretion of the institutions of higher education individually. In order to identify the demographic, social and economic factors that condition access, it is important to consider the following factors: cultural diversity, the economic and social gap, access and permanence, meritocracy and equal opportunities. These factors must be taken into account in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current situation.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Education as a human right**

To address the relevance of education from a rights-and-opportunity perspective, the literature review reflects that:

Education is an intrinsic human right and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. As a right within the sphere of personal autonomy, education is the main means of enabling economically and socially marginalized adults and children to escape poverty and participate fully in their communities. Education played a crucial role in the empowerment of women, the protection of children from labor exploitation, hazardous work and sexual exploitation, the promotion of human rights and democracy, the protection of the environment and the control of population growth (CESCR, as cited in Bolívar, 2010, p.3).

The theory that education is one of the most beneficial investments a government can make is gaining strength. However, its importance extends beyond mere practicality. As the CESCR (cited in Bolívar, 2010, p. 3) notes, having an educated, intelligent, and active mind, with freedom and breadth of thought, is a fundamental aspect of human existence.

### **Obligations of States to Guarantee the Right to Education**

UNESCO (2022) states that like other human rights, the right to education imposes different levels of obligation that States must fulfill: respect, protect and fulfil the right to education.

- ✓ The obligation to *respect* requires States to avoid taking measures that impede or impede the enjoyment of the right to education.
- ✓ The obligation to *protect* requires States to take measures to prevent third parties from interfering with the enjoyment of the right to education.
- ✓ The obligation to *comply* implies that States must take positive measures to facilitate and assist individuals and communities in the enjoyment of the right to education.

(Ibid.) (...) further stresses that the obligations related to each of the “essential features” of the right to education cover four areas: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. And, that States are also subject to the principles of non-regression (they should not deliberately take steps backwards by adopting measures that repeal or restrict the guarantees contained in the right to education), as well as to the greatest possible amount of allocation of available resources.

### **Access to higher education and the 2030 agenda**

The United Nations in the 2030 agenda establishes within the objectives of sustainable development: “Ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (p.3). As established in objective 4, these are guidelines that serve as a guide for countries to harmonize the development plans, policies and programs in order to encourage an education system that is the pillar of development and economic and social progress. The following table details the goal, goal and indicator of the 2030 agenda that mentions access to higher education:

**Table 1**

**Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda**

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**Objective 4.** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

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**Goal 4.3.** By 2030, ensure equal access for all men and women to quality technical, vocational and higher education, including university education.

**Indicator 4.3.1.** Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the last 12 months, disaggregated by sex.

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**Goal 4.5.** By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for vulnerable people, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

**Indicator 4.5.1.** Parity indices (between women and men, rural and urban areas, upper and lower wealth quintiles, and groups such as the disabled, indigenous peoples and those affected by conflict, as data become available) for all education indicators in this list that can be disaggregated.

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**Goal 4b.** By 2020, significantly increase globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, to enable their students to enroll in higher education programs, including vocational training programs and technical programs, scientific, engineering and information and communication technology personnel, from developed and other developing countries.

**Indicator 4.b.1.** Volume of official development assistance for fellowships, disaggregated by sector and type of study.

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**Note:** Own elaboration based on the 2030 Agenda, United Nations (2018).

**Organic Law on Higher Education and Access to Education**

**Equal opportunities**

**LOES (2018) Art. 71.- Principle of equal opportunities.** The principle of equal opportunities consists of guaranteeing all actors in the Higher Education System the same possibilities in access, permanence, mobility and exit from the system, without discrimination based on gender, creed, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, political preference, socioeconomic condition, mobility or disability.

This is a complex issue Morales, (2021) (...) makes an interesting emphasis when citing important authors on the subject:

- ✓ In the West, two conceptions of equality of opportunity exist: the levelling of the playing field and the principle of non-discrimination or merit. The second principle, which is more applicable in practice, is the one that calls for the establishment of competitive opportunities in society, wherein all individuals who meet the requisite characteristics are invited to participate and are evaluated solely on the basis of those characteristics, in a manner that ensures equality of prior conditions, as Roemer terms it, or a “leveling of the playing field.” It is imperative, first and foremost, to guarantee that all individuals possess an identical starting point, after which they are assessed according to their individual efforts.
- ✓ There are numerous parallels between this conceptualization of equality of conditions and the proposals of equality of capacities put forth by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. These parallels illustrate the necessity of establishing a baseline level of capacity to which all individuals must aspire to achieve. In the

absence of a minimum standard and guarantee of equality of conditions, the evaluation of distributions will be based on unequal and unfair merits.

- ✓ Atkinson posits that equality of outcomes is a significant concern, and to this end, he distinguishes between competitive and non-competitive equality of opportunity. In contrast to competitive equality of opportunity, non-competitive equality of opportunity implies that each individual is entitled to achieve their life project through their own efforts, without this outcome affecting the possibility of another individual to do so. To illustrate, in the context of education, all individuals should be afforded the opportunity to complete their basic education.
- ✓ The concept of equal competitive opportunity entails the assurance of participation in competition for all, yet the outcomes remain disparate. To illustrate, all students who have completed their secondary education have the opportunity to take an examination that will qualify them to pursue further studies at the post-secondary level. However, this does not guarantee that all of them will ultimately enroll in a university or other institution of higher learning. In addition, Atkinson posits that the distribution of results is a significant concern. If the distribution of prizes is highly unequal, it could be perceived as an unfair competition. If thousands of individuals compete for only two positions in higher education, this would also be an unfair competition under this premise.

### **Latest reforms adopted in the Higher Education System of Ecuador**

The higher education system of Ecuador has undergone significant changes throughout its history, particularly with regard to access and admission. These changes have been reflected in the reforms to the Organic Law of Higher Education. The following is a brief summary of the main changes that have occurred in recent years in line with Tarqui (2022):

- ✓ Before 2000, access was limited by the charging of fees to students, which restricted access to higher education, especially for vulnerable and low-income groups.
- ✓ It was not until 2008 that university education was considered non-profit, and the concept of free education began.
- ✓ In 2009 a program began that encourages entry to higher education for this purpose the state establishes the principle of compulsory free education from school to the third level of education, a series of scholarships are also promoted. It is important to mention that the plan for good living is beginning to be considered in the formulation of policies.
- ✓ In 2010, the legislative framework began with the creation of the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES), the National Secretariat of Science, Technology and Innovation (SENESCYT), the Council of Higher Education (CES) and the Council for Evaluation, Accreditation and Assurance of Higher Education (CEAASES) were created
- ✓ In 2011, the Organic Law on Intercultural Education (LOEI) was created, with this instrument the real change towards inclusion and educational equity is directed.
- ✓ In 2012, a new admission process to the Higher Education System was established, which consisted of a National Exam for Higher Education known by its acronym as ENES, although this strategy managed to increase the levels of access, it was the product of harsh criticism since as a result a large part of the

applicants could not access the desired career because they had not obtained the necessary score.

- ✓ In 2017, free and universal education is promoted through the Lifetime Plan and increases the quality, access and coverage of education at the national level from schooling to university.
- ✓ In 2018, the Organic Reformatory Law (LOR LOES) was enacted, which proposed that, in addition to the grade obtained in the national exam, the applicant's academic record, origin, and socioeconomic situation be considered. This would provide extra scores to those who are socially or economically vulnerable, with the goal of increasing their inclusion in the higher education system. Moreover, a number of scholarships were established with the objective of ensuring access to and the provision of free education.
- ✓ The latest reform concerning access gave higher education institutions the responsibility of determining the criteria for evaluating applicants. This reform resulted in the elimination of the standardized test that had previously been used to assess an applicant's aptitude and knowledge.

### Current context of access in Ecuador

According to the latest report by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology SENESCYT published in 2022, the gross enrollment rate in higher education:

*Table 2*

#### Gross enrollment rate in the Ecuadorian higher education system

<b>GROSS ENROLLMENT RATE IN THE ECUADORIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM</b>					
	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Number of people enrolled in ES	616,289.00	663,650.00	728,304.00	775,033.00	788,522.00
Number of people aged 18-24	2,041,757.00	2,070,973.00	2,099,369.00	2,126,758.00	2,152,890.00
<b>Gross Tuition Fee</b>	<b>30.18%</b>	<b>32.05%</b>	<b>34.69%</b>	<b>36.44%</b>	<b>36.63%</b>

**Note:** Retrieved from Higher Education Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators 2022.

*Board 3*

#### Gross enrolment rate in the Higher Education System by gender

<b>GROSS ENROLMENT RATE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM MALE GENDER</b>					
<b>Variables/Indicator</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Number of people enrolled in higher education	290,781.00	313,982.00	344,876.00	365,414.00	366,401.00
Number of people aged 18-24	1,030,735.00	1,047,128.00	1,063,091.00	1,078,506.00	1,093,192.00
<b>Gross Tuition Fee</b>	<b>28.21%</b>	<b>29.99%</b>	<b>32.44%</b>	<b>33.88%</b>	<b>33.52%</b>
<b>GROSS ENROLMENT RATE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM FEMALE GENDER</b>					
<b>Variables/Indicator</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Number of people enrolled in higher education	325,507.00	346,694.00	383,428.00	409,619.00	422,121.00

Number of people aged 18-24	1,011,022.00	1,023,845.00	1,036,278.00	1,048,252.00	1,059,698.00
<b>Gross Tuition Fee</b>	<b>32.20%</b>	<b>33.86%</b>	<b>37.00%</b>	<b>39.08%</b>	<b>39.83%</b>

**Note:** Retrieved from Higher Education Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators 2022.

*Table 4*

**Gross enrolment rate at universities and polytechnics**

<b>GROSS ENROLMENT RATE AT UNIVERSITIES AND POLYTECHNICS</b>					
<b>Variables/Indicator</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Number of people enrolled in higher education	530,732.00	557,011.00	591,868.00	620,986.00	635,547.00
Number of people aged 18-24	2,041,757.00	2,070,973.00	2,099,369.00	2,126,758.00	2,152,890.00
<b>Gross Tuition Fee</b>	<b>25.99%</b>	<b>26.90%</b>	<b>28.19%</b>	<b>29.20%</b>	<b>29.52%</b>

**Note:** Retrieved from Higher Education Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators 2022.

## METHODOLOGY

In this research, it was necessary to apply a methodological route that began with a documentary analysis. This allowed for the identification of higher education as a free and universal right, the law that governs higher education in Ecuador, and the guarantee of free and equitable access. Additionally, the reforms applied in recent years by the central government were also considered. The study employs a cross-cutting approach, examining the outcomes of access to higher education through the statistical data provided by the National Secretariat of Higher Education, Science and Technology on the gross enrollment rate over the past five years (2016-2020). The study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, presenting the findings in statistical form and analyzing the factors influencing access to higher education.

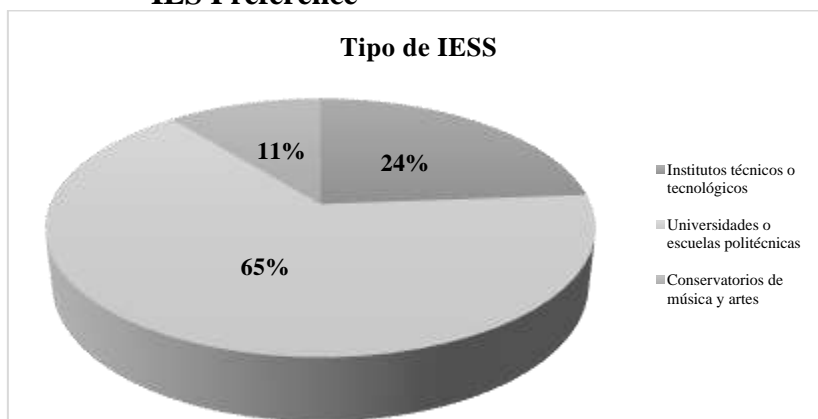
In the second phase, an instrument was employed to gather data from a sample of 5,000 applicants and/or students in the higher education system. This phase is descriptive-explanatory, reflecting the perspective of the subjects under analysis. In light of the implemented reforms, a series of aspects related to access to education have been addressed, including gender, economic and demographic situation, current condition, and experience obtained, particularly in the context of admission processes through the two most recent reforms. A correlation matrix was employed as a statistical tool to examine the relationship between the gross enrollment rate and overall demand, as well as by gender. Additionally, linear regression was utilized to ascertain the influence of the “demand” variable on the “gross enrollment rate,” and to elucidate its correlation with coverage rates or rates of access to higher education.

## RESULTS

The results of the application of the instruments to the 5,000 applicants of the last process of access to higher education are presented herewith. It should be emphasized that the information reflected is that which was obtained from the system used, and that it is presented from the perspective of the applicants, who are the users of the process. The principal findings are presented below.

With regard to the type of higher education institution to which applicants aspire to gain admission as their first choice, the data indicate that 65% (3268 out of 5000 applicants) prefer universities or polytechnic schools, 24% (1190) prefer technical or technological institutes, and only 11% prefer conservatories of music and arts.

**Figure 1**  
**IES Preference**



**Note:** Own elaboration.

With regard to gender, the figures for male and female students are almost identical. The study revealed that in the country's higher education institutions (HEIs), both men and women have the opportunity to access a quota. Ecuador is a multicultural and multiethnic country. It is therefore important to provide inclusive education that does not discriminate and is delivered in an equitable manner. In the aforementioned study, the ethnic composition of applicants was predominantly mestizo, which refers to individuals with parents of different ethnicities.

**Figure 2**  
**Gender and ethnicity**

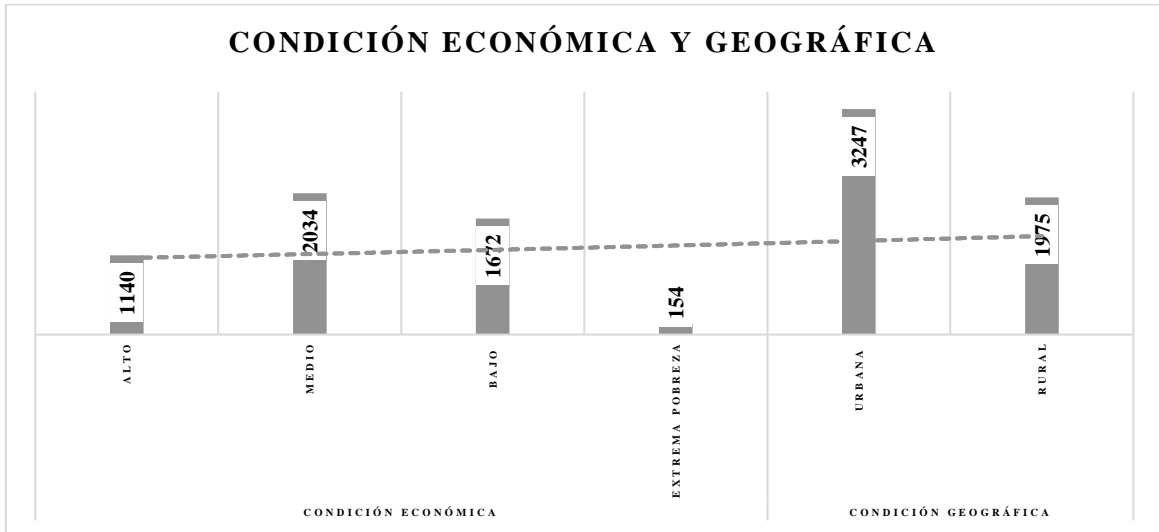


**Note:** Own elaboration.

The economic condition of the applicants is classified according to a structured system. The data indicate that 41% of the population is included in the middle economy, 33% are classified as low-income, 23% are high-income, and only 3% are in extreme poverty. With regard to geographical condition, it is important to recognize that there is greater access by those who settle in the areas that belong to the city (62%), and 38% to the rural area.

*Figure 3*

**Economic and geographical condition**

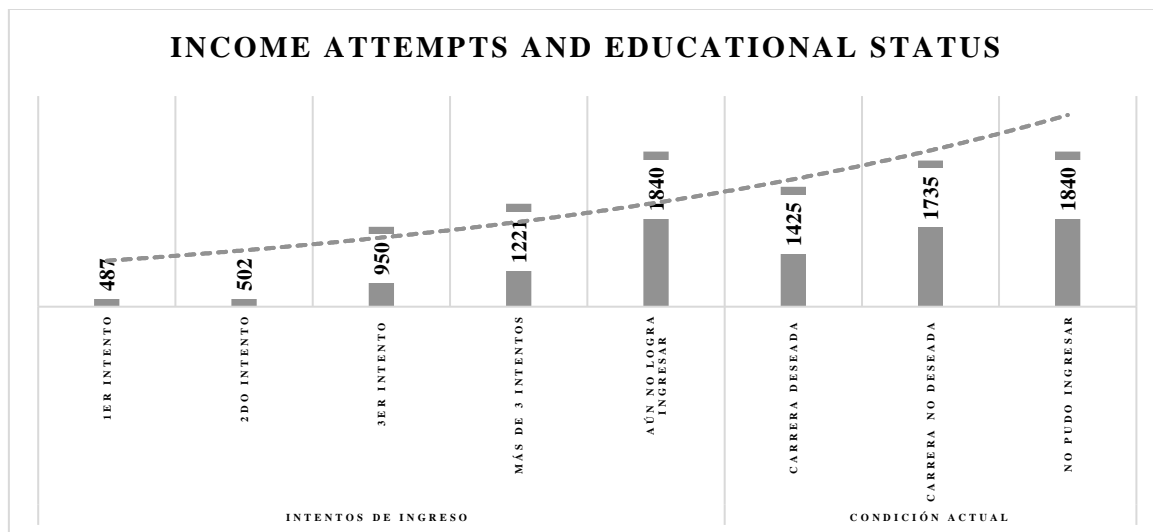


**Note:** Own elaboration.

Only 10% of respondents were able to gain access to a quota and enter higher education on their first attempt. Another 10% were successful on their second attempt, 19% on their third, and 24% made more than three attempts. The remaining 37% have not yet been able to gain access to a quota. These figures demonstrate that a significant proportion of applicants, despite having attempted the process once, twice, or even more than twice, have been unable to gain access to higher education. It is concerning that despite multiple attempts, many individuals are still unable to gain access to higher education. This highlights a critical issue that necessitates a closer examination of the underlying factors impeding the fulfillment of the state's obligation to provide inclusive and quality education up to the third level. It is noteworthy that the most recent reform introduced two avenues for access. Those who have attempted three or more times have done so through previous processes and were unable to secure a quota.

**Figure 4**

**Admission Attempts and Educational Status**



**Note:** Own elaboration.

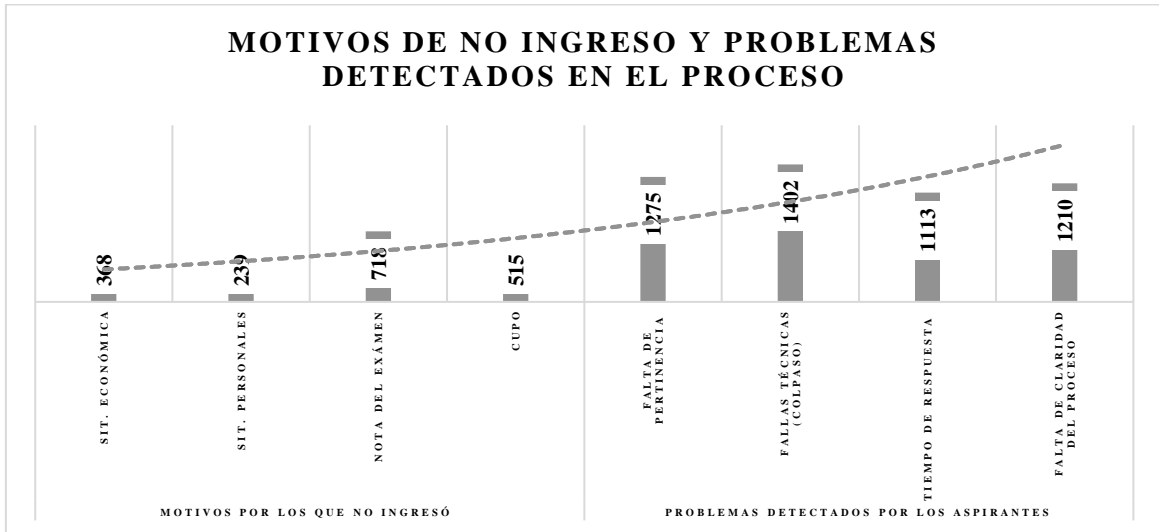
In accordance with the aforementioned rationale, 37% of applicants—or 1840 individuals out of a total of 5000—were unable to secure a place at their preferred higher education institution (HEI) due to the aforementioned reasons. The following graph delineates the potential causes or factors that may have influenced this outcome.

Specifically, 20% of these applicants (368 individuals) were unable to gain admission due to economic circumstances, 13% due to personal circumstances, 39% (718 individuals) due to their examination grades, and 28% due to the lack of available quotas.

In light of the considerable number of applicants who were unable to gain access due to their examination grades, it is imperative to identify the specific shortcomings of the system and the associated inconveniences they encounter in order to obtain a grade that would otherwise allow them to gain admission to a higher education institution (IES). In this regard, % believes that there is a notable lack of relevance. In other words, the examination does not assess prior knowledge. Twenty-eight percent of respondents indicated that technical difficulties, such as page collapse, prevented them from completing the examination and obtaining a grade. Twenty-two percent stated that the allotted time to complete the examination was insufficient and that there was no option to go back or skip a question. Twenty-four percent mentioned a lack of clarity in the process. The lack of dissemination by the institutions in charge—that is, both the Higher Education Institutions (IES) and the applicants—resulted in insufficient information being available to obtain better results. It is hoped that in future processes, these deviations will be corrected in order to increase access to higher education.

Figure 5

Reasons why I did not enter the SES



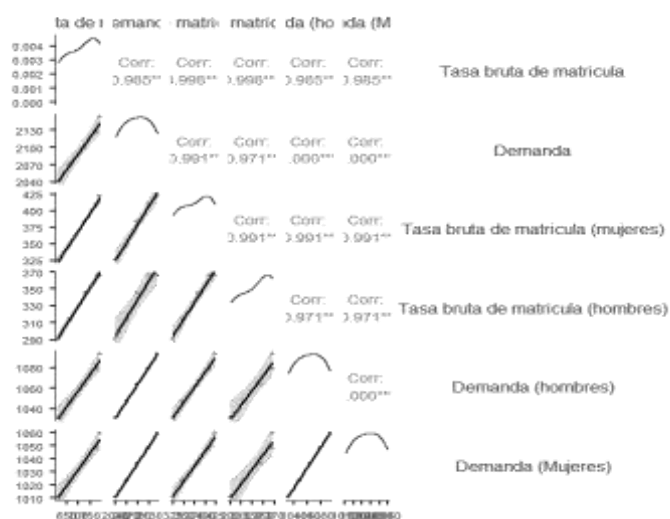
Note: Own elaboration.

Upon analyzing the correlations between the gross enrollment ratio and the general demand, as well as by gender, the following results were obtained: The high correlation between the gross enrollment ratio and the demand lends support to the assertion that there is a positive relationship between the supply and demand of higher education. Correlations approaching 1,000 between total and gender-specific demands indicate a robust and consistent relationship between these variables. These correlations indicate a strong correlation between the demand for higher education and tuition rates, both in aggregate and disaggregated by gender. As illustrated in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
**Correlation matrix and figure**

		Matriz de Correlaciones					
		Tasa bruta de matricula	Demanda	Tasa bruta de matricula (mujeres)	Tasa bruta de matricula (hombres)	Demanda (hombres)	Demanda (Mujeres)
Tasa bruta de matricula	R de Pearson	—					
	G1	—					
	valor p	—					
Demanda	R de Pearson	0.985 **	—				
	G1	3	—				
	valor p	0.002	—				
Tasa bruta de matricula (mujeres)	R de Pearson	0.998 ***	0.991 **	—			
	G1	3	3	—			
	valor p	< .001	0.001	—			
Tasa bruta de matricula (hombres)	R de Pearson	0.998 ***	0.971 **	0.991 **	—		
	G1	3	3	3	—		
	valor p	< .001	0.006	0.001	—		
Demanda (hombres)	R de Pearson	0.985 **	1.000 ***	0.991 **	0.971 **	—	
	G1	3	3	3	3	—	
	valor p	0.002	< .001	0.001	0.006	—	
Demanda (Mujeres)	R de Pearson	0.985 **	1.000 ***	0.991 **	0.971 **	1.000 ***	—
	gl	3	3	3	3	3	—
	valor p	0.002	< .001	0.001	0.006	< .001	—

Nota. \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.



Using the linear regression between gross enrolment ratio and demand, i.e. people who have accessed higher education and people between 18 and 24 years of age, the following results are obtained:

**Table 6**  
**Linear regression**

<b>Model</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>
1	0.985	0.970

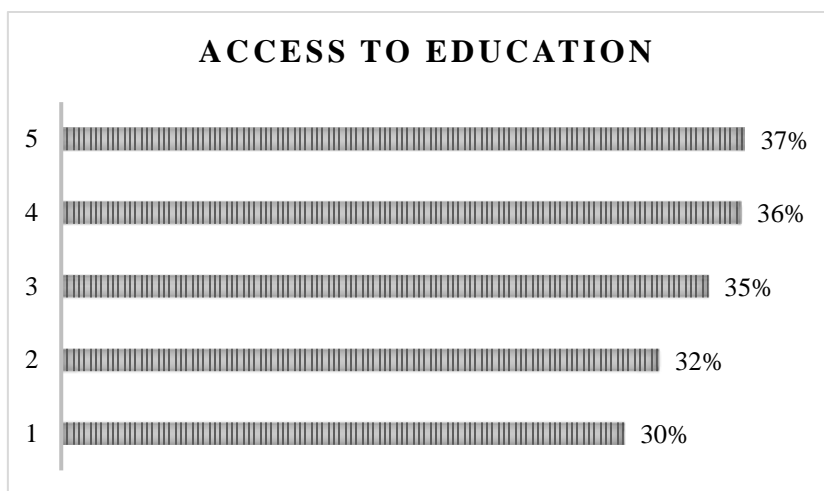
  

<b>Model Coefficients - Gross Enrollment Rate</b>				
<b>Predictor</b>	<b>Estimator</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
Constant	-2736.63	349.583	-7.83	0.004
Demand	1.64	0.167	9.87	0.002

The model reflects that for the increase of one unit in demand there would be an increase of 1.64 units in the gross enrollment rate, so there is a positive correlation between the two variables. The model analyzed by linear regression between the total population of higher education age (people aged 18 to 25) and people who have accessed a quota in higher education, i.e. universities and polytechnics, institutes and conservatories, suggests that demand is directly and significantly related to or influences the gross enrolment rate.

But when analyzing the real figures between supply and demand, it is established that of the population of study age only 30% had access in 2016, 32% in 2017, 35% in 2018, 36% in 2019 and 37% in 2020. The limited coverage (quotas) that exists in higher education in Ecuador reflects significant challenges for the government and public spending, relating these low figures as limitations for educational, social and economic development. The largest proportion of the population between 18 and 24 years of age is excluded, reflecting a persistent gap that deepens inequalities.

**Figure 6**  
**Levels of access to higher education**



**Note:** Own elaboration.

## DISCUSSION

In Ecuador, notable shifts have occurred with regard to access to higher education, giving rise to impassioned discourse surrounding the question of whether these processes are designed to facilitate the integration of marginalized groups or are shaped by the lingering effects of inequality. Education is widely regarded as a key factor in facilitating labor market integration and enhancing overall quality of life. Consequently, it is of paramount importance that the state ensures the provision of free and equitable access to education, with specific inclusion strategies tailored to groups such as women, individuals with disabilities, and those facing social and economic marginalization. A study of 5,000 applicants for higher education indicates that there is an equitable scenario with regard to gender equality. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology's data on access between 2016 and 2020 indicates that the female enrollment rate consistently exceeds that of males. A total of 51% of respondents were women, which lends support to the effectiveness of affirmative action policies designed to assist vulnerable women. These measures, such as support for single mothers and victims of violence, have had a significant impact on the inclusion of women in the public higher education system.

In Ecuador, institutions of higher education are classified into four main categories: universities, polytechnic schools, technical or technological institutes, and music and art conservatories. A majority (65%) of applicants express a preference for pursuing studies at universities and polytechnic schools. This preference may potentially impact the accessibility and availability of places at these institutions. In consequence of previous reforms, the government distributed applicants according to scores to the three groups of institutions, resulting in an increase in enrollment but also an increase in dropout rates. The latest reform permits students to select a university and career path. However, an increase in applicants without a quota is anticipated, as demand exceeds supply, particularly at the university and polytechnic school levels.

In terms of the incorporation of ethnic groups, strategies have been implemented that grant additional points for quotas and scholarships to individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The economic situation also exerts an influence, with 41% of the population situated at the medium economic level, 33% at the low level, and a mere 3% in extreme poverty. The constitutional right to free education up to the third level serves to promote the inclusion of economically repressed sectors. Nevertheless, the accessibility of education in rural areas is constrained by the paucity of resources and the unfavorable conditions that prevail there. A significant proportion of respondents (62%) who access higher education are from urban areas, which indicates a systemic issue with the quality of education in rural regions.

Of the 5,000 respondents, only 10% were able to gain admission to higher education on their first attempt, another 10% on their second, and 37% have yet to secure a place. The gross enrollment rate of 36.63% indicates that the capacity to meet the needs of the population is limited. Of the 63% who are within the system, only 29% are studying the desired career path, while 35% are studying a career path that was not their first choice due to their score on the entrance exam. A total of 37% of applicants have not obtained a place, primarily due to economic circumstances (20%), inadequate academic performance (39%), and a lack of available seats (28%). The causes of poor performance include a lack of process relevance (26%), technical failures (28%), and limitations in response time (22%). Despite the implementation of policies such as free tuition, scholarships, and affirmative action, enrollment rates remain below 50%. This underscores the necessity for increased state investment to expand the availability of

educational opportunities and better serve the population. It would be beneficial for future research to address the issues of program permanence and completion.

The analysis of the correlations between the gross enrollment ratio and the overall and gender-specific demand provides significant insights that support the positive relationship between the supply and demand for higher education. The nearly perfect correlation of approximately 1,000 between total and gender-specific demands indicates a strong and consistent relationship between these variables. However, when applying linear regression, the model reveals an increase of 1.64 units in the enrollment rate for each unit of increase in demand, indicating a positive correlation between both variables.

However, a discrepancy is revealed when these findings are compared with the actual figures for access to higher education. Although the regression model suggests a direct and significant relationship between demand and enrollment rate, concrete figures indicate that only 30-37% of the population of students aged 18-24 accessed higher education between 2016 and 2020. This limited quota coverage reflects significant challenges for the government in terms of both spending and the allocation of public resources, raising questions about the country's future in terms of educational, social, and economic development. The exclusion of a significant portion of the young population, specifically those between the ages of 18 and 24, indicates the persistence of a considerable gap that could potentially exacerbate existing inequalities. These findings highlight the necessity for a review and reformulation of educational policies to effectively address the discrepancy between demand and enrollment capacity.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in access to the higher education system in Ecuador, with women and men enjoying equal opportunities. This is indicative of the efficacy of the inclusion strategies that have been implemented by the government. Furthermore, individuals from diverse backgrounds are also included, with additional points allocated for access to scholarships and quotas in public institutions of higher education.

The gross enrollment rate remains relatively low and fails to meet the needs of the population. However, it has increased considerably with the introduction of free and universal education. Nevertheless, it remains a subject of criticism and analysis due to the access reforms that have been adopted in recent times. As indicated in the study, a significant proportion of applicants continue to experience difficulties in accessing quotas due to technical issues with the admission system. These applicants have highlighted that the platform utilized for the national examination lacks the necessary capacity, resulting in system failures that prevented them from completing their applications satisfactorily.

In conclusion, another aspect that warrants attention is the lack of relevance of the tests themselves, as they do not align with the knowledge that applicants have previously acquired. It is therefore imperative that the government conducts a thorough analysis from the perspective of students, with the aim of identifying shortcomings and enhancing the effectiveness of the admission processes for the Ecuadorian Higher Education System.

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