



## Factors that Limit Access to Higher Education



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### Abstract

The research focused on identifying the factors that hinder access to higher education for graduates of the Educational Unit Eugenio Espejo, located in the San Sebastián parish, Pichincha canton, Manabí province, during the 2022-2023 period. Through surveys administered to students and teachers, and an interview with the principal, the main limitations faced by young high school graduates in the transition from secondary to higher education were investigated, a stage considered a crucial point in their academic career. The study classified the limiting factors into socioeconomic, academic, institutional, and personal dimensions, all of which have a direct impact on the development and standard of living of students. Descriptive research was adopted, with a mixed approach (qualitative and quantitative), supported by the survey method and the application of a questionnaire as a technique for the analysis and interpretation of the information. The results show that high school graduates' aspirations for higher education are restricted primarily by adverse socioeconomic conditions, the complexity of admissions tests (such as the ENES), which create unequal opportunities for students from working-class backgrounds, and limited knowledge about the application process.

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## 1 Introduction

This research is of great importance as it analyzes the factors that limit access to higher education, to promote equity and inclusion, ensuring that education remains a universal right and a tool for the country's personal, social, and economic development. Access to higher education, considered a fundamental right, directly influences the comprehensive development of individuals and the nation's socioeconomic progress (Strijbos et al., 2015).

The study helps identify the main economic, familial, and institutional barriers that restrict the opportunities of young high school graduates, as well as propose policies and programs that promote inclusion and equity. Specifically, it seeks to strengthen vocational guidance, academic preparation, and student expectations, recognizing that the transition to higher education constitutes a decisive moment in their academic and professional careers.

Various studies (Peralta et al., 2020; Herrera & Rivera, 2020; Sinchi & Gómez, 2018) show that socioeconomic problems in rural areas significantly limit access to this level of education. Economic hardship often forces young people to abandon their studies to enter the workforce early and contribute to family income, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty and reducing their development opportunities. Among the most determining factors are financial difficulties, limited educational credit coverage, lack of vocational guidance, the demands of entrance exams, and the institutional capacity of universities.

Another challenge lies in the location of higher education institutions, as most are concentrated in major cities, forcing rural students to travel long distances or even temporarily reside in these cities (Véliz & Zambrano, 2019). This situation increases costs and difficulties in accessing them. Furthermore, the admissions system, with tests such as the "Transformar" exam, adds a level of complexity that sometimes limits equal opportunities for high school graduates from working-class backgrounds (Erreyes et al., 2019).

## 2 Materials and Methods

This research uses a descriptive approach, as it aims to characterize and analyze the factors that limit access to higher education. A mixed methodology was used, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon studied.

Using a qualitative paradigm, we sought to understand participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the barriers they face when attempting to access higher education. This approach allows us to delve deeper into the subjective perspectives of those involved, analyzing how they interpret their environment, their experiences, and the meanings they attribute to their reality (Hernández et al., 2010).

The objective of this research was to identify the socioeconomic, academic, institutional, and personal factors that limit access to higher education for students of the Educational Unit Eugenio Espejo, located in the Pichincha canton, Manabí province, during the 2022–2023 academic year. To this end, surveys were administered to students and teachers, and an interview was conducted with the institution's principal. A survey was used as the primary data collection method to obtain quantitative information and understand participants' opinions on the obstacles they face in entering university. The technique employed was a structured questionnaire, designed to collect data directly and systematically from the study subjects.

According to Abarca et al. (2013), the information gathering technique can be understood as a procedure that involves interaction between people, using conversation as a fundamental tool to access their perceptions and experiences. The population of the Educational Unit Eugenio Espejo is made up of 550 students (from upper elementary and unified high school), 33 teachers, and one principal. The sample consisted of 78 students who graduated during the 2022–2023 academic period, including both men and women. All teaching staff and the principal were included in the qualitative phase of the research.

## 3 Results and Discussions

In the Ecuadorian context, figures from the Higher Education Council (CES, 2022; 2024) reflect a mismatch between educational supply and demand. While in 2022 there were 57 higher education institutions with approximately 1,166 programs and 120,317 available places, the number of annual graduates exceeded 302,000, in addition to the number of graduates from previous years shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
Higher Education Institutions in Ecuador

IES ECUADOR	No
Public	31
Individuals with state income	8
Self-financed individuals	18
TOTAL	57

Source: CES (2022)

By 2024, the CES reports an increase to 63 institutions, including universities and polytechnic schools, although this expansion is still insufficient compared to the growing demand shown in Table 2.

Table 2  
Universities and Polytechnic Schools

IES ECUADOR	No
Public	35
Self-financed individuals	20
Co-financed individuals	8
TOTAL	63

Source: CES (2024)

In this framework, the objective of this article is to analyze the socioeconomic, academic, institutional, and personal factors that limit the access to higher education of the students of the Educational Unit Eugenio Espejo, located in the Pichincha canton, Manabí province, during the period 2022-2023. Socioeconomic factors are those elements that combine social and economic aspects, which have a direct impact on the growth and standard of living of people (Pontarollo et al., 2019).

Understanding these limitations will allow us to design strategies aimed at strengthening academic preparation, improving vocational guidance, and promoting inclusive policies that expand educational opportunities. Higher education, beyond its individual value, constitutes a pillar for economic growth and regional and national prosperity. This literature review provides a solid conceptual basis for understanding the factors that restrict access to higher education among students at the Eugenio Espejo Educational Unit. Identifying these factors is a fundamental step in developing effective strategies and policies that promote equal opportunities and facilitate access to higher education for all graduates (O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015).

#### *Economic and Social Barriers*

According to an ECLAC report cited by Pontarollo et al. (2019), socioeconomic factors are those elements that integrate social and economic dimensions and exert a direct influence on development, living standards, and people's well-being. These factors include variables such as income distribution, access to education, working conditions, and other aspects fundamental to the population's quality of life.

According to Muelle (2020), socioeconomic factors play a central role in the structuring of society, as they directly impact individual and collective well-being. This constant interaction between the economic and social spheres generates effects that can perpetuate inequalities or promote equity.

In this sense, Ponce et al. (2020), point out that an unequal distribution of income tends to generate significant social gaps, limiting equitable access to essential resources, services, and opportunities, such as higher education. Lack of financial resources represents a significant barrier to continuing education beyond secondary school. According to UNESCO data (2021), financial constraints are one of the main factors preventing many young people around the world from accessing higher education.

### *Impact of Educational and Vocational Guidance*

Santana et al. (2018), highlight the urgent need to strengthen vocational and professional guidance for young people aspiring to enter university programs in Ecuador. They point out that it is essential to create learning spaces complementary to the formal education system that provide academic value and adequately guide students, given that current mechanisms have proven insufficient to guarantee effective and well-informed entry into university. For their part, Timarán et al. (2019), emphasize that access to quality education, together with adequate training, is are key factors that determine the professional development of individuals.

### *Geographic Challenges and Limited Access*

In rural contexts, socioeconomic factors manifest themselves through interrelated processes that vary according to the geographic location and the specificities of each community (Freire et al., 2019). These areas, often marked by a high dependence on agricultural activities, face specific challenges that directly affect their socioeconomic structure and dynamics (Suárez et al., 2022).

### *Influence of Family and Cultural Factors*

Guerrero (2013) conducted a study entitled "How do individual and school factors affect young people's decision to apply to higher education? A longitudinal study in Lima, Peru. In her research, the author points out that parental influence is crucial in young people's decisions regarding university education, especially when their parents have completed higher education. Even in contexts with limited economic resources, parents' educational experience can motivate their children to value the importance of a vocational education, thus increasing the likelihood of them accessing higher education.

Despite advances in policies aimed at promoting the entry of vulnerable groups into the university system, structural barriers persist that hinder real access. This is evident in the lack of improvement in admissions indicators for public universities, which tend to be the most sought-after by young people from different social classes. Worryingly, in the last decade, the number of high school graduates enrolling in the National Leveling and Admission System (SNNA) without achieving the necessary scores for admission to a university program has increased. This situation has generated negative consequences for many students, restricting their right to public higher education, free from discrimination, and with the freedom to choose their preferred career, as guaranteed by the Ecuadorian Constitution (Ricardo et al., 2018).

Through a descriptive analysis, we delved into young people's perceptions of this issue. To this end, we collected and analyzed the responses, criteria, and opinions of representatives of the Ministry of Education through the 13D08 Pichincha-Education District Directorate, as well as authorities, teachers, and students who graduated from the Educational Unit in the 2022-2023 period. Eugenio Espejo, AMIE code 13H03088.

### *Interview with the Rector*

Based on the interview with Lic. Rosa Intriago, principal of the Educational Unit Eugenio Espejo (AMIE code 13H03088). What do you consider to be the main social, economic, or institutional factors that limit students' access to higher education in your region?

The rector pointed out that there is a marked disconnect between academic offerings and student demand, which prevents many young people, even those with high GPAs, from enrolling in the university program of their choice. This situation translates into high frustration and demotivation, as despite academic effort, the results do not align with their expectations (Van Dinther et al., 2011).

She also highlighted that the lack of career guidance and support during the application process is a recurring problem. Many students do not dedicate enough time to preparing or to adequately inform themselves about the admissions system. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of knowledge or limited participation of parents, who, in some cases, underestimate the value of a university education due to their own previous experiences or the economic limitations they face (Canelos, 2019). As a result, students can be influenced by family expectations, which can restrict their freedom to choose a career in line with their interests and potential. In this sense, understanding family dynamics is essential for designing strategies that promote fair and equitable access to higher education (González, 2024).

From an institutional perspective, the rector also expressed concern about the university admissions system, which is based on a unified evaluation that, in her opinion, fails to take into account the social, economic, and cultural inequalities that directly impact students' academic performance. This standardization, far from promoting equity, deepens existing gaps.

Furthermore, the shortage of human resources in both educational institutions and the SENESCYT (National Institute of Statistics and Census of Mexico) was identified as a structural weakness, limiting the implementation of guidance and support programs that allow students to make informed decisions about their academic future. According to [Zambrano & Parra \(2023\)](#), the SENESCYT does not have sufficient staff to adequately train educational institutions regarding the application process. This deficiency not only affects test preparation but also the correct selection of majors by applicants, which in many cases leads to inappropriate choices and eventual abandonment of higher education.

### *Survey of teachers*

An inquiry was conducted using structured questions with the teachers from the Eugenio Espejo Educational Unit. The first question related to the factors that hinder access to higher education, the results of which are shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
To what extent do you think the following factors hinder access to higher education?

Alternatives	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low academic level		
And	12	36,4
No	21	63,6
Limited information on admission processes.		
And	9	27,3
No	24	72,7
C, A single assessment defines access to a particular career.		
And	4	12,1
No	29	87,9

According to the results obtained, 36.4% of the teachers surveyed indicated that one of the main reasons why students do not access higher education is related to the low academic level with which they graduate from high school, as well as a lack of interest in learning. This perception coincides with the findings of [Zambrano & Parra \(2023\)](#), who also identified significant deficiencies in the academic training of graduates. Many applicants fail to achieve the minimum score required on university entrance exams, which could be linked to both low academic self-esteem and the perception of not having received adequate preparation or having the necessary resources. This lack of preparation becomes a significant obstacle to effective access to higher education ([Timarán et al., 2019](#)).

On the other hand, 27.3% of teachers believe that the higher education access system is not sufficiently clear for students when applying. They point out that there is limited or inaccessible information about the admissions process, which generates confusion, misinformation, and wasted time. This situation coincides with the statement by [González \(2024\)](#), who maintains that the lack of clear, complete, and timely information about requirements, dates, documentation, and procedures can constitute a significant barrier to students achieving their educational goals. Therefore, the need for educational institutions and responsible organizations to provide effective and detailed guidance is emphasized, allowing young people to face the application process with greater preparation and increase their chances of success.

Likewise, 12.1% of teachers expressed disagreement with the idea that a single assessment determines students' admission to university. They consider this approach to be one of the biggest flaws of the current system, as it reduces human potential to a single numerical result. Standardized assessments do not adequately reflect the multiple dimensions of a student's ability, such as their motivation, interests, soft skills, and adaptability—all of which are key elements for success in university and professional life.

In response, the professors propose a more comprehensive and holistic admissions model that includes a broader assessment of students. This would include their academic record, participation in extracurricular activities, letters of

recommendation from their teachers, and personal interviews. This approach would allow for more accurate identification of students with true potential, thus offering a fairer and more equitable system that values the diversity of abilities and experiences.

### *Student Survey*

Structured questions were administered to the school's high school graduates to gather relevant information. The first question focused on whether the ENES tests represent a barrier to university admission, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4  
Do you think that ENES tests make it difficult to access higher education?

Alternatives	Frequency	Percentage (%)
ENES tests make it difficult to access the university		
And		
No	22	66,7
	11	33,3

As observed in Table 4, 66.7% of high school graduates surveyed consider the ENES test to be a limiting factor for university admission. Added to this perception is dissatisfaction with the automatic assignment of university institutions based on the score obtained, which, in many cases, does not fit the preferences or needs of students. In contrast, only 33.3% stated that they do not consider this test to be a barrier. In this sense, Ponce and Carrasco (2001) argue that the ENES test approach is based on merit, oriented more toward efficiency and differentiation than equity. This implies that the system does not necessarily seek to guarantee equal opportunities, but rather to select students based on their performance, without considering the unequal conditions in which they are educated.

On the other hand, even those students who achieve the minimum required score do not always manage to enter their chosen program because the available academic offerings fall short of demand in certain areas of study. In this regard, [Santana et al. \(2018\)](#), argue that universities must constantly analyze social trends and needs to adapt their academic offerings and respond more effectively to student aspirations.

Likewise, [Timarán et al. \(2019\)](#) highlight that access to quality education and adequate continuing education are key factors for professional growth. A solid academic foundation provides the essential knowledge and skills needed to navigate the workplace, while specialized training enables professionals to respond to the demands of a constantly changing labor market.

One of the main factors hindering access to higher education is family income. Many young people are unable to enter or continue their university studies due to insufficient financial resources. In most cases, families prioritize meeting basic subsistence needs over investing in education. Table 5 shows Family Income.

Table 5  
Family income

Alternatives (\$)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
A. Less than 200	4	12,1
B. 200-300	12	36,4
C. 300-400	8	24,2
D. 400-500	7	21,2
E. 500 and up	2	6.1

This study found that 93.9% of families have monthly incomes between \$200 and \$500, while only 6.1% earn more than \$500 per month. Despite the free nature of higher education in Ecuador, this figure is insufficient to cover associated expenses such as transportation, food, academic materials, and other basic student needs. This situation contributes to the fact that the participation of young Ecuadorians and Montubios in higher education remains limited, which makes it difficult to fulfill the right of these peoples to a culturally and linguistically relevant education, as established by SENESCYT (2015, p. 77).

In disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts, students face significant financial barriers that affect not only access but also retention in the university system. UNESCO (2021) warns that financial constraints remain one of the main reasons why millions of young people around the world fail to access higher education. Although some systems offer free education, indirect costs, such as study materials, transportation, and maintenance, continue to create a gap in educational equity.

Addressing this problem requires coordinated action between the State, educational institutions, and various social actors. As Peralta et al. (2020) point out, it is essential to implement inclusive policies and programs that promote equal opportunities and eliminate economic barriers so that all young people, regardless of their financial situation, can access and remain in higher education and fully develop their academic and professional life plans.

## 4 Conclusion

Higher education in Ecuador continues to be a privilege rather than a universal right, especially for young people in rural areas and those in economically vulnerable situations. Despite institutional efforts to expand coverage and guarantee free tuition, structural barriers persist that hinder equitable and fair access. Socioeconomic factors represent the main obstacle to accessing and remaining in higher education. Most of the families surveyed have a monthly income of less than \$500, which is insufficient to cover the indirect costs of the educational process, such as transportation, academic materials, and food, despite the formally free nature of the system. This reality prevents many young people from sustaining their academic career beyond high school.

The admissions system based on standardized tests, such as the "Transformar" exam or the former ENES test, has proven to be inequitable and non-inclusive, as it fails to consider the social, cultural, and educational inequalities that affect applicants' academic performance. The automatic assignment of programs and institutions, based solely on scores, limits choice and generates frustration, demotivation, and, in many cases, abandonment of higher education. Misinformation about the application process and limited career guidance exacerbate inequality of opportunity. Both students and parents lack clear knowledge about the requirements, stages, and consequences of the admissions process, leading to poor decisions and low efficiency in program selection.

The poor academic achievement of many high school students and their lack of adequate preparation for the entrance exam reflect weaknesses in the previous educational system, which directly impacts their access to university. Most teachers recognize these shortcomings while questioning the validity of a single assessment as a criterion for determining a young person's academic future. Family and cultural factors also significantly influence the decision to pursue higher education. In contexts where parents have not completed university education or where there is a tradition of early entry into the labor market, educational expectations are lowered, and adequate support during the application process is limited.

The academic offerings of higher education institutions do not always respond to the aspirations and needs of students, especially in rural areas. There is a disconnect between the actual demand for programs and the availability of spaces, which further restricts access and choice. Given this situation, it is urgent to design and implement comprehensive, inclusive, and contextualized public policies that consider both the socioeconomic conditions of applicants and their individual needs. These policies should strengthen vocational guidance, diversify admissions mechanisms, improve the quality of high school education, decentralize academic offerings, and guarantee institutional support throughout the transition to university. Ensuring equitable access to this level of education not only responds to a constitutional mandate but also constitutes a strategic investment for the future of Ecuador.

### *Conflict of interest statement*

The authors declared that they have no competing interests.

### *Statement of authorship*

The authors have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The authors have approved the final article.

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