Persistence, Retention, and Interruption in Higher Education among Peruvian Scholarship Students in a Context of Emergency Remote Learning

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Abstract: In Latin America, higher education inequality disproportionately affects individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and Peru is no exception. Since 2012, the National Scholarship and Student Loan Programme (PRONABEC) has disbursed grants, aiming to enhance access to higher education for impoverished Peruvian young people. However, the unprecedented global health crisis in 2020 significantly affected the university experiences of scholarship recipients, introducing new challenges to their experience of higher education. This study, conducted in 2021, explores the factors influencing the persistence, retention and interruption of university studies among scholarship recipients. This qualitative, biographical study, based on the ecological model of higher education, involved 60 current and former scholarship students from public and private universities in three regions. Findings reveal that scholarships played a financial crucial role in supporting educational goals and institutional supports were pivotal in maintaining student retention. While personal motivation and family support contributed to student persistence overall, certain scholarship recipients faced challenges related to work and family demands.

Persistencia, retención, e interrupción en educación superior entre estudiantes becarios peruanos en un contexto de educación remota de emergencia

Resumen: En América Latina, la desigualdad en el acceso a la educación superior afecta desproporcionalmente a los individuos de baja condición socioeconómica y el Perú no es una excepción. Desde 2012 el Programa Nacional de Becas y Crédito Educativo, (PRONABEC) ofrece becas con el objetivo de generar un acceso igualitario a la educación superior para los jóvenes peruanos de bajos recursos. Sin embargo la crisis global en salud del 2020 afectó significativamente la experiencia universitaria de los becarios de una manera sin precedentes, introduciendo nuevos desafíos para su persistencia en la educación superior. Este estudio, desarrollado en el 2021, explora los factores que influenciaron tanto en la persistencia y la retención como en la interrupción de los estudios universitarios entre los becarios. El estudio cualitativo y biográfico, basado en el modelo ecológico de análisis de la educación superior, involucró a 60 estudiantes becarios y exbecarios de universidades públicas y privadas en tres regiones. Los resultados revelan que la beca jugó un papel financiero crucial en apoyar las metas educativas y que los apoyos institucionales fueron fundamentales para mantener la retención estudiantil. Aunque la motivación personal y el apoyo familiar contribuyeron a la persistencia, algunos becarios enfrentaron desafíos relacionados a las demandas familiares y laborales.
Palabras-clave: educación superior; programas de becas; persistencia; retención; interrupción

Persistência, retenção, e interrupção no ensino superior entre bolsistas peruanos em contexto emergencial de ensino remoto

Resumo: Na América Latina, a desigualdade no acesso ao ensino superior afeta de forma desproporcionada as pessoas de baixa condição socioeconômica e o Peru não é exceção. Desde 2012, o Programa Nacional de Bolsas e Crédito Educacional (PRONABEC) oferece bolsas de estudo com o objetivo de gerar um acesso igualitário à educação superior para jovens peruanos de baixos recursos. No entanto, a crise global de saúde em 2020 atingiu significativamente a experiência universitária dos bolsistas de uma forma sem precedentes, e desencadeou novos desafios para sua permanência no ensino superior. Este estudo, desenvolvido em 2021, explora os fatores que influenciaram na persistência, a retenção e a interrupção dos estudos universitários entre os bolsistas. O estudo qualitativo e biográfico, baseado no modelo ecológico de análise do ensino superior, envolveu 60 estudantes bolsistas e ex-bolsistas vindos de universidades públicas e privadas em três regiões. Os resultados revelam que a bolsa de estudos teve um papel financeiro crucial nos projetos educativos e apoios institucionais foram fundamentais para manter a retenção estudante. Embora a motivação pessoal e o apoio familiar contribuíram para a persistência, certos bolsistas enfrentaram desafios relacionados as exigências das famílias e trabalho.
Palavras-chave: ensino superior; programas de bolsas; persistência; retenção; interrupção

Persistence, Retention, and Interruption in Higher Education among Peruvian Scholarship Students in a Context of Emergency Remote Learning

Investing public funds in scholarships for low-income youth to access higher education (HE) has expanded in the global south in recent years (Pires et al., 2020). This study aims to understand the factors influencing persistence, retention, and interruption among scholarship holders in Peru, a South American country with a segregated educational context (Benavides et al., 2015). This inquiry is set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the emergency implementation of remote learning in HE for at least two academic years in Peru (March 2020 to March 2022).[1]

In Peru, as in the whole of Latin America, HE is offered through both private and public institutions. Public universities receive government funding to cover faculty salaries, infrastructure development, and research activities. Public universities are free, in contrast to private universities, which charge tuition fees. There is no national examination; each university has its own entrance exam. Public universities tend to be more selective than private ones, with a selectivity rating of 6 for public universities compared to 1.5 and 1.25 for non-profit private universities and for-profit private universities, respectively[2] (Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior, 2021). Many students from low socioeconomic backgrounds cannot afford preparation courses for entrance exams, tuition at private universities, or, if admitted to public universities, even the costs of living. Only 21.8% of young people from the lowest socioeconomic quintile have access to HE, compared to 59.7% from the highest quintile (Ministerio de Educación 2020). Inequality of access to universities for low-income students is a common phenomenon in Latin America. They face barriers due to limited financial aid, unequal academic readiness, and socioeconomic disparities (Ferreira et al., 2013; Ferreyra et al., 2017).

In Peru, both public and private universities offer (limited) financial aid programs. However, in 2012 the government launched the National Scholarship and Student Loan Programme (Programa Nacional de Becas y Crédito Educativo, PRONABEC), devoting public funds on an unprecedented scale to scholarships for low-income youth to study at public and private universities and institutes throughout the country. This policy seeks to improve social inclusion and diversity in higher education (Rodríguez González, 2020), as stated in PRONABEC's mission statement: "We work to achieve a more equitable society, promoting access, permanence and completion of quality higher education for talented people with limited economic resources".[3]

Beca 18 was the first scholarship programme created with public funds that aimed to ease access to HE for young people living in poverty or extreme poverty. Beca 18 offered a comprehensive scholarship that covered the costs of tuition and living, a laptop computer, and a remedial academic programme (Ames, 2020b). The main eligibility requirements were proof of living in poverty[4], certification of a high grade-point average upon completion of high school, a national examination to qualify for the scholarship, and admission to an eligible university degree programme. Between 2012 and 2021, 76,573 students benefited from the Beca 18 programme[5]. Although Beca 18 is targeted at students at both public and private universities, the

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[1] This work was supported by the Office of Research Management at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP).

[2] This means that for each student admitted in public universities there were six applicants, whilst in private universities there were 1.5 or 1.25 applicants for each admitted student.

[3] https://www.gob.pe/institucion/pronabec/institucional

[4] This is done through the Household Targeting System administered by the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion, which classifies households into three socioeconomic categories: non-poor, poor, and extremely poor.

[5] The data on the number of scholarships and dropout rates was provided by PRONABEC in 2021.

disproportionate numbers of scholarship holders attending the latter prompted calls for a scholarship targeted at students attending public universities (Ames, 2020a). In 2016 the Beca Permanencia was created to provide financial assistance to public university students with high attainment levels in the third or subsequent semester of their degree programmes, to provide them with "the means to devote themselves solely to their education without the need to work to support themselves or cover their household costs."[6] This grant, awarded to 30,426 low-income students between 2016 and 2021, is intended to help recipients meet the costs of food and transport, and overcome other potential economic barriers to continuing and completing their studies.[7]

Prior research on scholarship programmes in Peru has highlighted challenges faced by scholarship-holders such as adapting to university life, bridging knowledge gaps compared to peers from higher-quality schools, navigating unfamiliar urban environments, and living independently (Cotler, 2016). Anaya and León (2015) observed that scholarship holders in Lima encounter an urban culture marked by competition, individualism, and limited peer support, which often hinders their social integration and can lead to discrimination at university.

In contrast, studies on scholarship programmes elsewhere in Latin America, such as Colombia, show significant positive effects on access to HE for low-income youth. These students have lower dropout rates and form social networks similar to their peers, which supports their integration despite mixed feelings of shame, pride, and anxiety about attainment and meeting expectations on the part of scholarship holders (Álvarez Rivadulla, 2019; Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2022). However, in Peru, there is a notable distance between scholarship and non-scholarship students, particularly in private universities (Ames, 2020b).

Although access to HE is an important goal in a segregated educational market, we are concerned with the retention and persistence of these students throughout HE until completion. This concern needs to be placed in the context of a major health crisis that affected HE globally. The COVID-19 pandemic, starting in March 2020, forced a shift to remote learning in Peru, significantly affecting scholarship holders' lives, responsibilities, and personal projects (Bustamante, 2020). From March 2020 to March 2022, the Peruvian HE system relied on remote education. Given these unprecedented circumstances, this study aims to analyse the factors explaining the persistence, retention, and interruption of HE among Peruvian students who are (or were) beneficiaries of a scholarship programme during the public health crisis. Through a qualitative biographical study, we explore the ways in which PRONABEC's scholarship programmes supported students during the crisis and, conversely, the extent to which the crisis disrupted HE and forced the withdrawal of scholarships.

First, following Mendoza et al. (2016), we review the theoretical and empirical literature on university students' retention in different contexts of study and place them within an ecological model of student retention in higher education. Next, we present our methodological design, which features a sample of scholarship students attending universities in three regions of Peru and uses the Ageven form, an analytical tool aligned with the ecological model. The results are presented in three sections, corresponding to different layers of the ecological model and focusing on the impact of the pandemic, the factors that promoted retention, and those that interrupted students' higher educational careers. Finally, we discuss our findings on the key reasons for student retention or interruption at university in Peru during the pandemic, and the

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[6] Source: https://www.PRONABEC.gob.pe/noticias/inscripciones-a-concurso-por-beca-permanencia-inician-este-27-de-junio/

[7] PRONABEC manages and provides funding also for other scholarships schemes: Pacífico Alliance (studies and research in Chile, Colombia and Mexico), Bicentennial Generation (postgraduate studies); Children of Teachers (directed to public teachers' sons and daughters); Inclusion (for persons with disabilities); Short term courses for victims of political violence or for indigenous peoples of the Amazon. It also manages scholarships offered and funded by other, private institutions (Beca Perú) or by other governments (International cooperation). PRONABEC also offer student loans.

role that scholarships played in mitigating or overcoming the hardships experienced by these students.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

The creation of scholarship programs in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic aimed to facilitate access to HE for vulnerable populations, such as those in poverty. Our theoretical and empirical review is aimed at understanding what factors are at play for both retention and interruption in HE.

Higher Education Retention and Interruption within an Ecological Framework

There are numerous studies on retention and dropout of students in HE, mainly in the global north. The work of Tinto (1975, 1993) took a pioneering and influential theoretical approach that has been reworked and reframed over time in different contexts (de la Garza-Carranza et al., 2013; Hovdhaugen et al., 2023; Mendoza et al., 2016). His model is based on two levels of observation whose interactions provide an explanation of students' degree of commitment to their university programmes and, in some cases, why students might abandon their studies. These levels are: 1) personal aspects, including family background, individual characteristics, and earlier educational experience, which influence aspirations and motivations, and 2) interactions within the university environment that facilitate academic, institutional, and social integration.

Although Tinto's model has been criticised, especially for not considering students' ethnic backgrounds and cultural differences (Museus, 2013; Tierney, 1992), it has been influential and reframed by Latin American scholars. Thus, for example, de la Garza-Carranza et al (2013) analyzed Mexican HE and highlighted the importance of social and organizational integration. Students start university with their own individual and family attributes, but from then on teaching staff and peer groups influence their personal development. Sustaining high academic attainment, setting clear goals, and forming networks in the university all shaped students' decisions to stay at university. For Colombia, Patiño Garzón and Cardona Pérez (2012) stress the individual factors that affect students' personal and family histories, economic difficulties, shortcomings of secondary education, and a lack of vocational orientation as the main factors driving student dropout. Mendoza et al. (2016) adapted Tinto's model within an ecological system theory to study the case of a technical college in Colombia.

Tinto (2017) himself recognised that retention is a concept developed from an institutional perspective (HE institutions want to retain students), while the point of view of students is that they want to persist in HE. Tinto complemented his institutional model of retention by considering persistence from students' point of view, highlighting the importance of self-efficacy, a sense of belonging and perception of the curriculum as factors that strengthen students' motivation to persist. In this paper we use both concepts, retention and persistence, as they account for different perspectives (institutional and student) towards the same result: the completion of a degree in HE. They are also interrelated since, as Banks & Dohy (2019) explain, student characteristics interact with the characteristics of the institutions they attend. While the term "drop-out" is a concept widely used in the literature, we prefer to talk of the "interruption" of HE studies. Drop-out assumes a definitive end to HE studies, whilst interruption leaves open the possibility that students will resume their studies at a later moment, as often occurs with vulnerable populations.

Other authors concerned with retention from an institutional point of view highlight factors such as educational quality, student support policies, access to bibliographical and technological resources, and students' social and academic integration (Chen, 2012). Several authors point out the interconnection of academic and social integration (Deil-Amen, 2011; Mendoza et al., 2016; Museus, 2013) and its relation to a sense of belonging. Focusing on the

decision to drop out in the first year of HE, Wilcoxon (2010) highlights personal variables such as lack of commitment to the demands of university, the wrong choice of degree programme, and feelings of social isolation, as well as academic variables such as lack of skills among teaching staff and unrealized learning expectations. Stephens et al. (2015) explain that disparities in HE manifest in the performance of working-class students, through lower levels of academic attainment and graduation rates. This is due to pedagogical deficiencies at public schools, which have insufficient funds or teachers to develop the skills necessary for university. In addition, many students need to work in parallel to studying, which restricts their opportunities for integration within the university, which is often compounded by a lack of support from parents who have not been to university.

　　　Class differences and their effects on working class students have been studied by Bourdieu and Passeron (2009), who underline the influence of institutional culture in the French HE system. The authors show that the sectors most endowed with cultural capital (i.e., knowledge, language, or dispositions inherited from family and related to class position) have an advantage in HE, since cultural capital from upper classes is the most valued in the HE system. This unequal valuing of cultural resources exercises symbolic violence against lower classes and reproduces an unequal distribution of knowledge and resources in society. More recent work highlights the importance of cultural and social capital in relation to social and academic integration in HE (Deil-Amen, 2011; Mendoza et al., 2016; Wells, 2008). In Latin America, Mato (2016), Souza Lima (2008) and Dietz (2017) took an intercultural approach to exploring the differentiated evaluation of knowledge at universities, focusing on the cases of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. Their results attested to the ethnocentric bias of university education, particularly the exclusion of Indigenous knowledge and diverse experiences that can transform university practices.

　　　To capture how these different factors play out in particular contexts, we follow the proposal of Mendoza et al. (2015) to understand them within an ecological model for HE. Mendoza et al. (2016) located Tinto's institutional conditions for students' retention within the layers of (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) ecological system theory, which conceptualizes human development as influenced by nested environments. The microsystem includes the individual and its closer spaces such as family and community. The mesosystem, takes into account the normative pressures that emerge from the microsystem. The exosystem, considers institutional policies, financial aid, and students' economic conditions. The macrosystem, as its name indicates, encompasses broader political, economic, social, and cultural contexts. Finally, the chronosystem refers to the specific moment in history and in localities, including historical events, social movements, and cultural trends, but also life transitions. The conditions for retention we have listed so far are located in the students' microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems. As a global historical event, the COVID-19 pandemic is part of the chronosystem, so we briefly review the studies of its consequences on university students.

Chronosystem: Pandemic's Impact on University Students

　　　HE institutions' responses to the pandemic globally varied widely, even within countries, depending on the resources of each university. These range from no response or simple course postponement to strategies aimed at avoiding students' social isolation on campus, moving to online instruction, and implementing digital strategies (Crawford et al. 2020). For example, Duraku and Hoxha (2020) highlighted the effects of remote learning during the pandemic on the mental health of students in Kosovo. Emotional support from teachers proved to be a key factor in managing this period. However, students' lack of concentration and reduced motivation to attend online classes, along with limited private space at home and family distractions, were disadvantages in online learning. These factors contributed to a moderate level of perceived stress and psychological and somatic anxiety.

Regarding students who lived alone during this period, Knight et al. (2021) explained that emotional responses to self-isolation were diverse, ranging from a feeling of indifference to a significant drop in morale associated with loneliness, leading to difficulties in adapting to the new expectations of university life in the implementation of remote education. In a study of the daily life of students during the pandemic in 62 countries worldwide, Aristovnik et al. (2020) demonstrated overall satisfaction among students regarding the support provided by their teaching staff during this period, as well as a perception of a higher workload and increased concerns about their future careers, leading to significant uncertainty and anxiety.

Difficulties in managing academic workloads were highlighted among English students by Aristeidou and Cross (2021), in addition to limited interaction with other students and tutors, and employment issues and childcare and caring responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gonzalez et al. (2020) demonstrated in the Spanish context that the COVID-19-related lockdown had a significant positive effect on students' performance, thanks to learning strategies based on continuous engagement that increased their efficiency.

Miranda Pinto (2020) studied the effects of COVID-19 on the university experience in Latin America, and documented an exacerbation of social inequalities in HE for the case of Brazil. The most disadvantaged students were most affected by the pandemic. They faced greater difficulties paying their tuition fees at private universities and in accessing technology to take part in remote classes. In Argentina, Seminara (2021) revealed that student retention was directly related to psychological wellbeing, while dropping out was associated with problems related to lack of time, lack of motivation, social isolation, stress, and uncertainty. Relatedly, in Ecuador, Pertegal-Felices et al. (2022) showed that university dropout is correlated with a low level of student resilience in the face of the pandemic.

The conceptual framework highlights the main factors influencing university student retention, persistence, and interruption as identified in the literature, related to the micro, meso, and exo systems within a macrosystem marked by an unequal and segmented educational system. The chronosystem, defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated issues such as social integration within the university, access to technological and bibliographic resources, social isolation, institutional identification, financial difficulties, and family problems. The lack of social interaction and the shift to online courses posed significant challenges for students in maintaining motivation, concentration, coping with social isolation, and safeguarding mental health. While numerous studies were conducted in the US, fewer focused on Latin American countries. There has been no research on how the pandemic affected Peruvian scholarship holders and their educational trajectories. Our analysis of educational retention and interruption among young people during the public health crisis in a Latin American context thus contributes to existing knowledge by expanding empirical evidence on the HE system in the global south. Figure 2 (presented in the next section) summarises the way we conceptualise the retention factors presented in the literature review within an ecological model.

Materials and Methods

What factors affect the persistence, retention and interruption of HE among Peruvian students who are (or were) beneficiaries of a scholarship programme during the public health crisis? How did PRONABEC's scholarships help students cope with the crisis? To what extent did the crisis disrupt HE and force the withdrawal of scholarship holders? These are the research questions we aimed to address through a qualitative and biographical research design anchored in life course theory (Elder et al., 2003). We used semi-structured interviews to inquire about biographical data and university experiences. The interview protocol contained eight sections. For this paper we focus on data gathered in sections 4 to 8, as they relate most directly with the research questions addressed here. Section 4 inquired about the factors leading to persistence and section 5 about the factors leading to interruption; section

6 and 7 inquired about family relationships and partner relationships respectively as they may relate to persistence and/or interruption, whilst section 8 asked about how Covid affected their university experience. Questions within each section aimed to produce information on four levels of observation across time: individual, family, institution and context, corresponding with the micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems. Due to the restrictions of the pandemic, we conducted the interviews remotely, either by telephone or by video call, and recorded them with the consent of the participants. Interviews took between two and three hours.

The study was carried out between May and July 2021 in three regions of Peru: La Libertad, Loreto, and Puno, which are representative of Peru's three major geographical/cultural environments (the coast, the Amazon and the Andes, respectively). La Libertad is a coastal region in the north of the country with rural and semi-urban areas surrounding the main city, where several HE institutions attract young people in the area. Loreto is the biggest and most culturally diverse region in the country, with 27 ethnic groups; its universities, located in the capital city Iquitos, serve Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from urban and rural backgrounds. Puno is in the southern Andes, where universities enroll students from the surrounding rural areas, with Quechua and Aymara backgrounds. Taken together these three regions represent the diversity of contexts in the country.

We chose a public and a private university in each region. The type of management was relevant for comparison in a context of growing enrollment in private HE institutions but also because of a shift of public policies to support more public HE institutions. There is only one public university in each region but there may be more than one private university. We chose the latter according to the number of scholarship holders, to maximize the chance of recruiting participants. We approached university authorities in each of the selected universities and met with them personally. All universities agreed to participate.

At each of the six universities we interviewed 10 students: current beneficiaries of a scholarship programme or former beneficiaries who had dropped out and lost their funding, before, or during the pandemic. Given the restrictions of the pandemic that required us to contact students through phone or email, we employed non-probability and purposive sampling to gather 60 scholarship holders from the Beca 18 and Beca Permanencia programmes, distributed equally among men and women. The students were contacted directly by the research team based on information we obtained from a formal request to PRONABEC. The main criteria for inclusion was that participants had one of the scholarships. We encountered more difficulties contacting scholarship students who interrupted their studies in Puno and La Libertad (one and three cases, respectively) than we did in Loreto (nine cases). However, this does not reflect the dropout rate in each region (18% in La Libertad, 12% in Loreto, and 10% in Puno). The participants gave their consent and participated voluntarily in the study. In this paper we replace their real names with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

For the analysis of the results, we adapted the Ageven form (see Figure 1), a tool for the systematization and representation of biographical data pertaining to an individual across each of the trajectories that comprise their life course (Cavagnoud et al, 2019). Observing students' university trajectories meant considering the positive or negative events and situations related to their family environment and the contexts in which their life courses unfold. The time unit t of this form is expressed in years from birth until the time of the interview.

Figure 1

The Ageven Form (adapted to this research)

Interviewed ego	Levels of observation	Variables	Biographical data *ego*																				
Ego name: Age: Sex: Date: Place: No:	Context	Social and economic																						
		Political																						
		Health																						
	Institutional/university	University environment																						
		Organizational integration																						
		Social integration																						
		Student support policies																						
		Others																						
	Family	Father and mother																						
		Siblings																						
		Other relatives																						
		Household Economics																						
		Family climate																						
	Individual (*ego*)	Education																						
		Work/personal finances																						
		Peers/social life																						
		Residence/migration																						
		Partner/sexuality																						
		Health/mental health																						
	t	Year																						
		Age	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	n

Overlaps and undated data:

Source: compiled by authors.

The Ageven form aligns well with the theoretical framework based on retention factors within an ecological model (see Figure 2). The individual level of this tool corresponds to the microsystem and encompasses the various trajectories of students (educational, occupational, social, residential/migratory, affective, and health-related), allowing for the recording of relevant information about the personal aspects and characteristics of each young person in these different social spheres, with a particular focus on events occurring within these trajectories that alter their life course (for example, graduation from school, migration to a city, forming an affective relationship, birth of a child, etc.). The micro level also includes the family domain, corresponding to biographical data related to students' parents, siblings, domestic economy, and family climate. Secondly, the institutional level presented in this instrument refers to the meso and exo dimensions of the theoretical model, allowing for the recording of information regarding the interactions of young people in the university environment through their academic, institutional, and social integration (or exclusion), as well as student support programs implemented by universities, access to bibliographic and technological resources, and the institutional culture of each university. Finally, the contextual level of the form echoes the macrosocial dimension and integrates sociohistorical processes related to structural inequalities in access to education and discrimination against disadvantaged and culturally marginalized populations due to their class, geographical or ethnic origin. The historical context characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of emergency remote learning constitutes the chronosystem, but the tool also contributes to understanding individual life trajectories and transitions.

Figure 2
Location of Observational Levels of Ageven within an Ecological Model for Higher Education
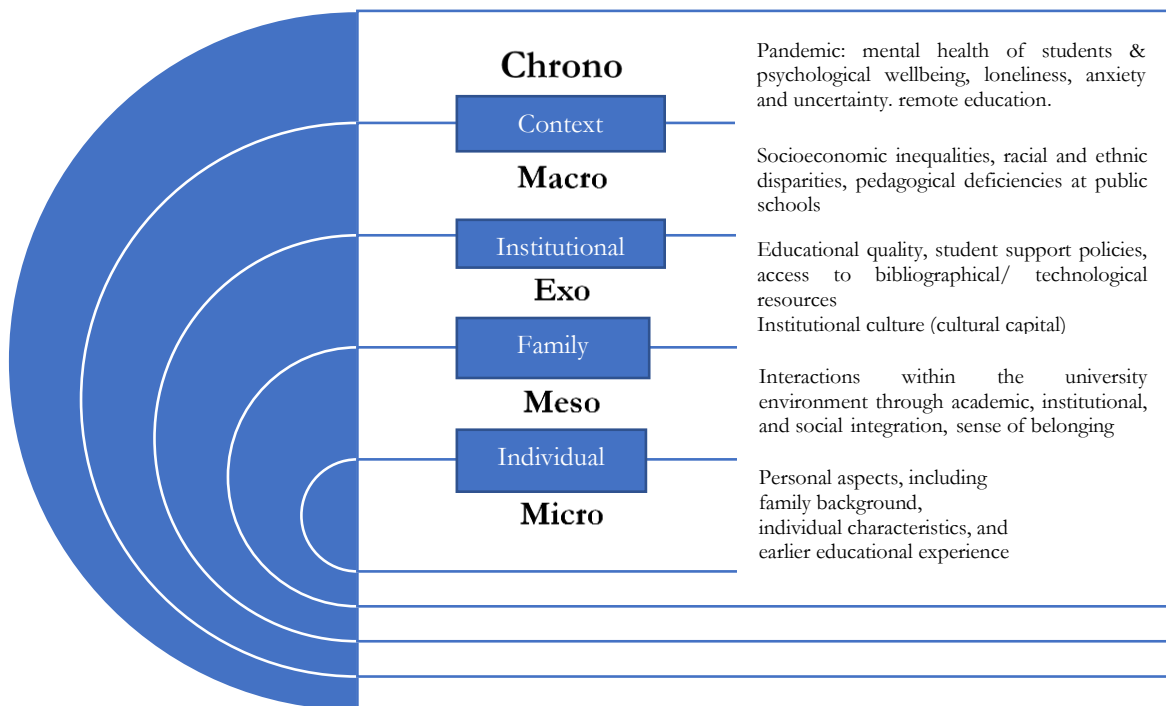
Source: compiled by authors.

Results

The results are presented across three sections, each integrating the personal biographies and testimonies of scholarship holders to illustrate the impact of various systems on their educational trajectories. The macrosystem (higher education), as described in the introduction, highlights the social inequalities that characterise HE in Peru and sets the stage for the students' individual stories. The first section addresses the chronosystem, focusing on the implications of the public health crisis on the university experience of scholarship students. The second section turns to the factors that contributed to students' persistence and their retention in HE within micro, meso and exosystems. Finally, the last section focuses on the factors that precipitated interruption.

Chronosystem: Risks Associated to Students' University Progression

The COVID-19 pandemic jeopardized the persistence of students in HE. We explore four major issues related to the consequences of the pandemic: mental health and motivation; adapting to remote learning; connectivity; and economic hardship, as presented to us by students themselves.

Students' Mental Health and Motivation Levels

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mandatory confinement imposed by the authorities left many students unable to return home to their families, forcing them to live alone. On top of being isolated from their family members, some students expressed sadness over their inability to socialize with classmates. Magali, 20, a student majoring in systems engineering at the Universidad Científica del Perú in Iquitos and a beneficiary of the Beca 18 Comunidades Nativas de la Amazonia (CNA) shared:

> From the first weeks that the pandemic started, I felt lonely, often sad. I didn't have any classmates living near my home, and I couldn't go out for fear of getting infected. It was very difficult to concentrate on my studies every day with this feeling of loneliness. (interview, June 12, 2021)

Beyond the periods of mandatory confinement, fear of getting (or passing on) the virus prompted voluntary home confinement and prolonged feelings of solitude. This fear had consequences for students' mental health and motivation to attend classes and focus on their studies. Added to these problems were the frequent concerns over finding available oxygen supplies for family members with COVID-19 amid nationwide shortages, as well as the grief over the death of family members from the virus.

Emergency Remote Learning

A factor regularly mentioned by scholarship students related to the experience of distance education through platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, with which they were unfamiliar. Before the pandemic, many universities did not have specialized teaching methodologies for virtual education. These measures had to be implemented as a matter of emergency, which meant that they were not as effective as distance learning provisions planned with due anticipation. Universities had to delay the recommencement of the academic calendar for several weeks to make the minimal level of preparations. This new educational format required exceptional efforts on the part of students to adapt to new tools. Students also had to learn forms of concentration and discipline that they had not previously experienced.

Rogelio, 22, a student of geological engineering at the Universidad Nacional del Altiplano (UNA) in Puno and a beneficiary of Beca 18, explained that distance learning had a significant impact on his course of study, which primarily involved fieldwork and laboratory work:

> With virtual classes, we haven't been learning as we should be. We try to put in all
> our effort, but it's not possible. We couldn't go out to the field, and we only saw
> amazing images and videos, but it's not the same. In those moments, both my
> classmates and I were greatly affected. The other issue was the learning method,
> which was not suitable because often, through a laptop, we get sleepy. We can pay
> attention for 1 hour, 1 hour 20 minutes, and then our eyes start to burn, we get
> drowsy, and it's impossible to continue classes for up to 6 hours straight. (interview,
> July 17, 2021)

On the other hand, the new learning context caused frequent losses of communication among students. The lack of socialization at university was a dispiriting factor for many students who were unable to draw on the support of their peers to make sense of and share concerns about coursework and exams. This situation was compounded by insufficient understanding or inclination on the part of some of the teaching staff to support students in distance learning, partly because of their own lack of familiarity and inexperience with the new virtual technologies and platforms.

Virtual Classes

In addition to the challenge posed by the implementation of an online education offering, connectivity problems associated with antiquated or defective devices were another recurring risk factor for interruption. Jerónimo, 20, a student majoring in civil engineering at the Universidad Privada del Norte (UPN) in Trujillo and a beneficiary of the Beca 18, explained:

> When the pandemic started, virtual classes began, and it was difficult to access faster
> internet to avoid difficulties in video conferences. We ordered internet packages, but
> they took a long time to arrive, and in the meantime, we had to use an overloaded
> and low-quality internet connection, many times through a cellphone. (interview,
> June 12, 2021)

The unequal distribution of high-quality internet connections, a lack of fibre optic technology, and inadequate electricity supply are common problems in Peru that became more prominent during the pandemic, especially in the region of Loreto. The digital gap between urban and rural areas was also important, in that numerous students returned to their communities of origin due to fear of transmission in the major cities and to overcome isolation.

Economic Difficulties

The closure of businesses as part of the COVID-19 containment measures created a situation in which some students' parents could no longer work to get through the crisis. Many young people reached a point at which their education was side-lined, due to the need to work in the informal sector to help provide for their households.

Yolanda, 26, a student majoring in biological sciences at the Universidad Nacional de Amazonía Peruana (UNAP) and a beneficiary of the Beca Permanencia, described her family situation:

> My aunt took care of all the expenses in the end because it was her brother
> [Yolanda's father became seriously ill with COVID-19], and seeing him like that
> hurt her a lot. Additionally, both my dad's and mom's families started supporting
> us. It was uncomfortable because I felt like I was receiving charity. I started
> selling the things I had, and we ended up with nothing. Sometimes, there was

> nothing to eat, and what mattered were the medications. (interview, June 16, 2021)

On the other hand, some students assumed new domestic care responsibilities, distancing them from the demands of their degree programmes. Indeed, when grandparents or other older family members fell ill to the virus, students were often the household members least exposed to its worst effects and thus assumed the caregiving responsibilities usually discharged by their own parents. Taking charge of these daily caregiving tasks posed a direct risk to the continuation of many of the students' university education. Yolanda added, "It was stressful to have to attend classes and see my dad lying in bed, complaining that he was suffocating, that he lacked oxygen, and giving him medication… The whole situation was terrible."

Factors Leading to Persistence in HE

Given this adverse context, we next examine the main combinations of factors that allowed most students to get through the crisis and persist with their education in the scholarship programme, organized by ecological levels.

Microsystem: Family Support

Following the implementation of mandatory confinement and the remote learning format, many young people opted to leave the place to which they had migrated—before or after the imposition of travel restrictions—and return to their parents in their settlements or communities of origin. This return meant a new kind of co-habitation with family members after months or years of residential autonomy and readapting to a collective way of life that included participation in domestic chores and other home responsibilities. In these circumstances, the warmth of the family environment emerged as a key factor to facilitate persistence with their studies. When the students recognized a sense of unity and support at home with their families, they found better conditions for concentrating in class.

This is exemplified by the case of Roberta, 22, from Requena in Loreto, who was in the ninth cycle of a degree in environmental engineering at Universidad Científica del Perú in Iquitos, and was a beneficiary of Beca 18:

> We had in-person classes all January, February, and March until they were suspended from March 13. Because they decided in time that there would be two weeks without activities, I took advantage of the last day there was [freedom of] movement and went to Requena [in Loreto]. (interview, June 15, 2021)

Roberta's stay in her community continued as the authorities declared new mobility restrictions, and she remained there until remote classes came to an end. This allowed her to count on the moral support of her parents, both primary teachers, who were able to teach remotely and continue to earn money during the pandemic. This situation also provided Roberta a room to herself in which to study and the internet connection she needed to attend virtual classes.

> We took great care of each other and went out only to go shopping, because we didn't even get access to medication. It was tough. The only one who got a bit more seriously ill was me, but a nurse came to our home to check on me and I got better. (interview, June 15, 2021)

Returning to her family home coupled with the moral and financial support of her parents allowed Roberta to continue attaining high grades and complete her studies.

The economic and psychological difficulties caused by the pandemic and its multiple consequences—parental unemployment, a steep decline in income, concerns over buying food, illness or death of a close family member, and so on—required family members to pool together. When a system of mutual assistance is organized within a family network, families are better positioned to address problems. For students, this network can assist them in finding the motivation to continue with their studies.

This was particularly striking in the case of Julia, 21, from the Yagua ethnic group, who was in the seventh cycle of a nursing degree at UNAP and a beneficiary of the Beca 18 CNA. At the start of the pandemic, she opted to return to her home community, which required a day of travel by boat from Iquitos, the city where she studies. Her father engages in subsistence agriculture and her mother is a worker at an infant care centre. Mandatory confinement measures prevented the family from obtaining income. To make matters worse, the pandemic's impact in the region was devastating:

> It has affected us both financially and psychologically. My entire family stayed at home without working and we saw in the news that it was all deaths and more deaths. For a while we stopped watching television because it was affecting us too much. My partner got COVID and almost died. My mum still gets the after-effects; my grandmother, everyone in the family had them. (interview, May 23, 2021)

In these circumstances, it was her aunt that was able to sustain the family as well as Julia's education:

> My aunt lives in Canada and she's doing okay financially. She always sent us a little money because we had no other income. Apart from that I had no savings and used my scholarship to spend on medication. She's the only aunt that can always help us. She's a nurse and is studying to become a doctor. (…) She always calls me, talks to me, and gives me advice and I'm very grateful to her. (interview, June 16, 2021)

This support allowed Julia to prioritize her education rather than working. She performed well despite problems with her internet connection, and passed all her courses during the pandemic.

Mesosystem: Scholarship Support

For many students, the scholarship was a vital source of support that aided the purchase of internet services for the family home. Indeed, this funding allowed many of them to acquire a better-quality service, assure connectivity, and follow online classes without major difficulties. Moreover, the scholarship was a means of emotional as well as material support that helped motivate the students and overcome the trauma of the pandemic by looking towards their professional development. When some of the universities disbursed additional grants for the acquisition of a laptop computer, some students chose to add this sum to their existing scholarships to obtain a better device and assure access to online platforms.

For instance, Julián, 23, who is in the ninth cycle of a systems engineering degree programme at UNA in Puno, received the Beca Permanencia. Like many other students, Julián went home, to Sicuani, four and a half hours by road from Puno, at the start of the pandemic and attended classes remotely. He spoke of the emotional impact of confinement at home: "The stress of not being able to go out and not being able to unwind after a course, and just being there [at home], exhausts you" (interview). Julián's parents encouraged him and his four siblings to undertake higher education even though they themselves had not done so, resulting in a "pro-university" family synergy and strong bonds of mutual assistance between the siblings. Moreover, the scholarship provided some peace of mind when it came to meeting expenses during the temporary

unemployment of their father: *"Thanks to the payment from the scholarship I've been able to pay for good connectivity. It's not perfect because the line goes from time to time, but these are minor things"* (interview). Julián pointed out that the university's provision of internet packages lasted for one academic semester only. But the service he acquired helped him pass all his courses during the remote learning period, and graduate from his degree programme.

Exosystem: Institutional Support

As a student support policy, some universities provided remote psychological counselling and medical consultations to monitor student wellbeing at a distance. This was recognized as a very useful source of support at times of high COVID-19 transmission. It is also worth mentioning the provision of free online tutoring, remedial sessions, and supplementary classes by teaching staff hired through PRONABEC, as well as the training and tutorials offered via the Aprende Más distance learning platform. The students also noted the orientation talks organized by PRONABEC on healthcare strategies, as well as the administration of questionnaires aimed at discerning students' emotional states during the pandemic. This institutional support was valued, and represented an additional motivation. Some universities also lent tablets, while public universities gave out internet packages to assure connectivity.

Camilo, 21, was in the eighth cycle of a degree in political sciences at UNT and had been a recipient of Beca Permanencia from the academic year preceding the pandemic. Before mandatory confinement, he went back to his family home in Santiago de Cao, 30 kilometres north of the city of Trujillo. Four of his aunts and uncles died during the first wave of COVID-19. Camilo regrets the loss of physical contact with his friends during the first year of the pandemic, even if he was able to keep in touch through social media. However, problems with connectivity were a constant throughout the period of remote learning. Camilo recalled:

> My connection is really bad. Here there's not even cable internet coverage, just the telephone signal to get internet [...] But I've got a small mobile phone that you put a SIM into and it gives out a signal. The school gave us internet SIMs. It's slow but it's been very useful for classes. (interview, May 31, 2021)

In addition, Camilo explained that PRONABEC supported him financially with an emergency voucher to buy a new laptop computer. The combined assistance from his university and the national scholarship authority allowed Camilo to complete all his third-year courses as well as taking part in a distance exchange with a private university in Lima.

The support provided by other organizations was also notable. For instance, in Iquitos, the Organization of Students from the Indigenous Peoples of Peruvian Amazonia (Organización de Estudiantes de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonia Peruana, or OEPIAP, in Spanish), in conjunction with the regional government, provided lodging and food for Indigenous students, and also managed to offer support and medicines for students with COVID.

Factors leading to HE Interruptions

Microsystem: Family Needs

The public health crisis imposed new family responsibilities, and in some cases, these could not be reconciled with students' studies. Some students decided to leave their studies to work and support their families, who had no other sources of income. The time spent doing so meant their coursework was neglected. Other students, women in particular, were often overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for family members who were often sick with COVID.

One such case was that of Claudia, 23, from the Kukama ethnic group, who was studying at UNAP when her parents caught COVID while she was staying with her older sister in Lima. The declaration of a health emergency made travel impossible, and her parents' medical situation was gradually deteriorating.

> My parents said they were okay, but they were gradually getting worse. My dad got severe coronavirus, it was serious. He had difficulty breathing and there was no medication there, and we were in Lima going crazy. We didn't know what to do. I wanted to go back [to her community] at that point but I couldn't. (interview, May 30, 2021)

Once domestic flights recommenced in August 2020, Claudia returned to her home community to care for her younger sisters, who were on their own while their parents were in hospital. She noted: "[Her sisters] were feeding themselves. No one was going around, no one reached out. They made soup and the like for themselves as far as they could manage." This situation, added to the fear of getting the virus in Iquitos, influenced Claudia's decision to stay in her home community, even though the lack of internet coverage there made it impossible for her to carry on studying. "I went back and there where I was there was no internet. But now I was there I stayed to look after my parents, my little sisters. That was how I lost my scholarship." Her mother's hostel business was the main source of income for the family, which meant Claudia did not have to work. However, Claudia's mother became angry when she found out her daughter had dropped out of her scholarship and degree programme, regarding this as a lost opportunity.

Mesosystem: COVID Transmission

Among those students who dropped out, some mentioned getting COVID-19 in the first weeks of the pandemic. Some students suffered severe effects, including weight loss and depression, which, in the worst cases, threatened their lives. The virus kept these students away from their courses for several weeks, and left them unable to take exams. They lost contact with their classmates, the university, and PRONABEC, which disrupted their education and resulted in their scholarships being taken away from them. In other cases, failing exams precipitated the suspension of the scholarship, based on the rules and conditions in place at the time.

One such example is Percy, 22, who was a chemical engineering student at UNAP and a beneficiary of Beca 18. He fell ill with dengue and then COVID-19 in the early weeks of the pandemic. Percy shared:

> In 2020, I enrolled and that was when I got sick with dengue.[8] I didn't study, and failed all my courses. That was in the first semester, when I started the classes. Just as I was getting better, I felt COVID tightening its grip and it floored me. I got seriously ill, very seriously ill. It was really bad. I felt like I was going to die. I felt like if I went to hospital, I would die. [...] I remember one night my mum was saying goodbye. It was really sad." (interview, May 23, 2021)

During this period, Percy lost touch with everyone related to the university. At the end of the semester, he was informed that he had failed all his courses and that the scholarship had been withdrawn as a result. Percy's explanation about what had happened was not enough to remedy the situation; instead, he was told that he should have explained the situation to the scholarship office to

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[8] In the case of Iquitos, some students came down with dengue. The epidemiological alert caused by this disease preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, but received less media coverage.

withdraw from his courses. But the social isolation during his months of illness precipitated severe mental health problems, side-lining his studies.

Situations like the above were especially prevalent in the early months of the pandemic. In subsequent semesters, scholarship administrators were more flexible when it came to assessing cases and retaining scholarship students who had failed or dropped out of their studies on health grounds. However, many students were suspended from their respective scholarship programmes during the first academic semester of 2020.

Exosystem: Technical Issues

Finally, problems with IT equipment, combined with limited internet access and an inability to buy new materials in the middle of the pandemic, disrupted the studies of several scholarship holders. This situation attests to the importance of access to devices and services required for taking part in virtual classes.

The case of Joaquín, 22, who studied economics at UNT with the support of a Beca Permanencia award in 2019, is illustrative to this point. At the start of the pandemic, Joaquín decided to return home to his parents in the rural district of Casa Grande, which is an hour by bus from the city of Trujillo, but various technical difficulties arose. He explained:

> When they said that the classes were going to be virtual, I had a computer, but then it broke down, and in my house, we didn't have internet either. […] As it's a small village there wasn't always internet. There was nowhere to get printouts to do the work, and that's when I decided to put it aside [his studies]. (interview, June 16, 2021)

These material problems were compounded by his difficulties in meeting expenses, so Joaquín elected to work for a financial venture recommended by a friend. He noted: "It's a digital business on market investments […]. I followed someone who did videos on YouTube, an international conference speaker. I liked them. They opened my mind to seeing things differently." In his view, this activity offered greater earning and personal development opportunities than staying at university, where in three years he perceived no such benefits. Joaquín could financially support his parents, whose diabetes placed them at risk and left them unable to work since the start of the pandemic. Thus, for Joaquín, a combination of economic pressure, technical difficulties, and more gainful and meaningful work opportunities lead him to leave HE.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our study sought to understand what factors were at play for persistence, retention, and interruption among scholarship holders of Beca 18 and Beca Permanencia in Peruvian universities amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conceptual framework relies on studies related to student retention and persistence in HE located in an ecological system theory.

We situated individual factors within the microsystem level, and found a strong personal motivation in most of the students who continued studying. Such motivation helped them to get through difficult times with resilience and a clear goal of finishing their career. Conversely, when we found lack of motivation (due to disengagement with studies, health problems or family concerns), students tended to interrupt their studies. Family support received by students was also an important factor, even if their parents did not attend university themselves. Parents and other family members provided moral as well as affective support and, in some cases, also modest financial support for students who returned to their family homes.

As evidenced in prior studies (Patiño Garzón & Cardona Pérez, 2012; Stephens et al. ,2015), family financial hardship was a significant factor in university dropout during the pandemic due to the low income of many households and the need of many students to contribute to family earnings. We also documented caregiving activities that many students had to assume for family members with, or at high risk from, COVID-19. Becoming sick, attending to relatives who become sick, or assuming a larger share of domestic chores were factors at the microsystem level that lead to interruption of HE. All these situations negatively affected some students' motivation to continue with their programmes. Family support was weakened when family members became sick and needed attention. In addition, the health system crisis at the macrosystem level also contributed to the microsystem level demands, since families were left alone to solve the health crisis when the medical system was overloaded.

Thus, the data regarding university scholarship recipients shows a strong connection between family support and personal motivation, as the former nurtures the latter through moral advice and material help. However, in the context of the pandemic, the need to physically care for family members illustrates how additional demands fall on the students when there is no institutional support from the health care system. This is particularly true of the female students to whom caregiving is disproportionately assigned.

At the exosystem level, the existence of student support policies during the pandemic, including the scholarships themselves and access to technological resources, created a scenario favorable for HE retention. The experience of several students shows that when household income was too scarce to meet basic needs, the scholarship became a fundamental source of support, partially or even entirely comprising the family's livelihood. Before the pandemic the scholarship was instrumental in allowing students to devote themselves to their education, without the need to work. And in many cases, confirmation of scholarship funding in the early weeks of the pandemic was decisive in preventing withdrawal from the university system. The flexibility of the scholarship programmes, even when classes were disrupted, was key to covering living expenses such as food, transportation, or rent, and without it many scholarship holders would have had to stop studying. This monthly payment continued its basic function of alleviating the conditions of poverty or extreme poverty in which its recipients and their families had been living since before the pandemic.

Aligning with (Chen 2012), our findings show that student support policies prove instrumental in times of crisis. The award of a scholarship and its disbursement during the pandemic, as we have seen, was a decisive factor in facilitating student retention in the Peruvian university system, while also helping them tackle financial hardship. Chen (2012) also takes into account academic and social integration, a factor also highlighted by Tinto (1975, 1993) and de la Garza-Carranza et al (2013). During the pandemic, isolation reduced students' opportunities for social integration. Wilcoxon (2010) points to feelings of social isolation as a factor leading to drop out. Also, Seminara (2021) underscored how social isolation was a factor leading to drop out during the COVID pandemic in Argentina. Likewise, institutional identification may have been more difficult to achieve in the circumstances of the pandemic. Indeed, during the pandemic some students lost contact with university and PRONABEC staff, and as a result, they lost their scholarships. In these cases, a decline in social integration and institutional identification led some students to fail to take advantage of student support policies as they were overwhelmed by other concerns such as health, care, and work. In these cases, the scholarship was not enough.

Despite the absence of personal interactions with peers and teaching staff due to the mandatory confinement, students described strategies they used to overcome such hardships, such as using social media networks to communicate with peers and family, or moving back to their families to avoid isolation while taking classes remotely. Also, the efforts by PRONABEC and universities to support students, from the rapid adoption of virtual platforms to continue to provide

remote education, to remedial classes to reinforce content in difficult courses, tutoring sessions, counselling and other measures of student support, supported greater institutional identification and recognition among university students, thereby contributing to their retention.

Our study did not assess the quality of education or the academic environment in the universities, as the pandemic required we conduct remote interviews instead of participant observation in universities. However, interviews revealed difficulties in using virtual platforms, as students were new to these platforms. Moreover, students reported that some of the teaching staff were not able to support students in distance learning, partly because of their own lack of familiarity with the new virtual technologies. Our own use of video calls and Zoom for the interviews highlighted poor-quality connections, especially in Iquitos, which may have also affected the quality of lessons and education provided in that region. More research is needed to assess this aspect of HE during the pandemic.

Our findings indicate that more investment in student support policies, including support for health and mental health related issues, remedial classes and tutoring, and aid to access computer devices, as well as financial scholarships covering the costs of studying, may increase the retention of students from low-income households through HE. However, student support policies may need to provide targeted support for female students burdened with additional family care responsibilities, either by providing flexibility for their reinsertion in the study program and scholarship; or by offering information and services to cope with family care.

Finally, the results confirm the exacerbation of social inequalities during the pandemic—a trend analysed in other Latin American countries (Miranda Pinto, 2020). More specifically, we observe new forms of inequality that are based on connections between social, economic, and territorial variables to which rural parts of the country are most exposed. The lack of high-quality internet coverage throughout Peru affects the country's social life, and during the pandemic, it was a key factor in hindering the university education of young people largely reliant on scholarships.

Acknowledgements

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