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Social Inequalities and Study Choices: Dynamics of Exclusion in Access to Higher Education in Ecuador

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Abstract: Despite the global expansion of higher education, studies show that merit-based admission systems do not necessarily eliminate social inequalities. Instead, they may reproduce barriers to entry or widen horizontal gaps linked to prestige and quality hierarchies among institutions and degrees. In 2012, Ecuador introduced a higher education reform that established a single admission system based on standardized test scores and secondary school grades as the main entry criterion, while incorporating measures to promote inclusion through affirmative action. This study examines vertical and horizontal inequalities shaped under

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Ecuador's higher education admission system. Analyzing data from 2020 applicants, it assesses how social inequalities are reproduced through application scores and study choices. The results indicate that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those with non-traditional educational trajectories, and those with prior educational disadvantages not only tend to achieve lower admission but also exhibit a reduced likelihood of choosing highly selective institutions or degrees, regardless of their scores. These findings challenge the assumption that access to the most selective programs is based solely on academic merit and problematize the rhetoric of 'free choice' in students' transitions to higher education, contributing to the comparative analysis of access policies that combine merit-based criteria with affirmative action.
Keywords: educational inequalities; higher education access; merit-based admission systems; academic results; selective study choices

Desigualdades sociales y elecciones de carrera: Dinámicas de exclusión en el acceso a la educación superior en Ecuador

Resumen: A pesar de la expansión global de la educación superior, diversos estudios muestran que los sistemas de admisión basados en el mérito no necesariamente eliminan las desigualdades sociales. Por el contrario, pueden reproducir barreras de acceso o ampliar las brechas horizontales vinculadas a jerarquías de prestigio y calidad entre instituciones y programas de estudio. En 2012, Ecuador introdujo una reforma de la educación superior que estableció un sistema único de admisión basado en los puntajes de pruebas estandarizadas y las calificaciones de la educación secundaria como principal criterio de ingreso, incorporando al mismo tiempo medidas para promover la inclusión mediante una política de acción afirmativa. Este estudio examina las desigualdades verticales y horizontales configuradas bajo el sistema de admisión a la educación superior en Ecuador. A partir del análisis de datos de postulantes del año 2020, se evalúa cómo las desigualdades sociales se reproducen a través de los puntajes de postulación y las elecciones de carrera. Los resultados indican que los estudiantes de menores niveles socioeconómicos, aquellos con trayectorias educativas no tradicionales y quienes presentan desventajas educativas previas no solo tienden a obtener puntajes de admisión más bajos, sino que también muestran una menor probabilidad de elegir instituciones o programas altamente selectivos, independientemente de sus puntajes. Estos hallazgos cuestionan el supuesto de que el acceso a los programas más selectivos se basa exclusivamente en el mérito académico y problematizan la retórica de la "libre elección" en las transiciones de los estudiantes hacia la educación superior, contribuyendo al análisis comparado de las políticas de acceso que combinan criterios meritocráticos con acciones afirmativas.
Palabras clave: desigualdades educativas; acceso a la educación superior; sistemas de admisión basados en el mérito; resultados académicos; elecciones de carreras selectivas

Desigualdades sociais e escolhas de curso: Dinâmicas de exclusão no acesso ao ensino superior no Equador

Resumo: Apesar da expansão global do ensino superior, diversos estudos mostram que os sistemas de admissão baseados no mérito não eliminam necessariamente as desigualdades sociais. Pelo contrário, podem reproduzir barreiras de acesso ou ampliar as desigualdades horizontais associadas a hierarquias de prestígio e qualidade entre instituições e cursos. Em 2012, o Equador introduziu uma reforma do ensino superior que estabeleceu um sistema único de admissão baseado nas pontuações de testes padronizados e nas notas do ensino secundário como principal critério de acesso, ao mesmo tempo que incorporou medidas para

promover a inclusão por meio de ações afirmativas. Este estudo examina as desigualdades verticais e horizontais que se configuram no sistema de admissão ao ensino superior no Equador. A partir da análise de dados de candidatos de 2020, avalia-se como as desigualdades sociais se reproduzem através das pontuações de admissão e das escolhas de estudo. Os resultados indicam que estudantes de contextos socioeconômicos mais baixos, aqueles com trajetórias educacionais não tradicionais e aqueles com desvantagens educacionais prévias não apenas tendem a obter pontuações de admissão mais baixas, como também apresentam menor probabilidade de escolher instituições ou cursos altamente seletivos, independentemente das suas pontuações. Esses resultados questionam o pressuposto de que o acesso aos programas mais seletivos se baseia exclusivamente no mérito acadêmico e problematizam a retórica da "livre escolha" nas transições dos estudantes para o ensino superior, contribuindo para a análise comparativa de políticas de acesso que combinam critérios meritocráticos com ações afirmativas.
Palavras-chave: desigualdades educacionais; acesso ao ensino superior; sistemas de admissão baseados no mérito; resultados acadêmicos; escolhas de cursos seletivos

Social Inequalities and Study Choices: Dynamics of Exclusion in Access to Higher Education in Ecuador

The global expansion of higher education (hereafter HE) has not necessarily translated into a reduction of inequalities, as access barriers persist both vertically and horizontally (Brunner & Labraña, 2020; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). The reproduction of these inequalities is closely tied to the nature of admission systems (Boliver et al., 2015; Finger, 2022; Killgore, 2009). Research has consistently shown that socioeconomic background significantly influences academic performance and the scores students achieve on HE admission tests (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Massey, 2006). Consequently, when university admission depends heavily on academic results, it often excludes students from low socioeconomic backgrounds or those facing social disadvantages (Alon, 2009; Liu, 2011).

In addition, social inequalities shape HE choices regardless of academic performance (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014; Jackson et al., 2007). These disparities are particularly evident in the selection of institutions and fields of study that vary in prestige and selectivity (Davies & Guppy, 1997; McCowan, 2016). Indeed, evidence shows that students from less privileged backgrounds, even when they achieve good academic results, are less likely to choose or gain access to these more selective options (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Massey, 2006; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2011). This can be explained from perspectives that argue that educational choices are complex and multidimensional processes, not solely guided by a rational logic of cost–benefit maximization (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Reay, 2018).

Within this framework, debates on meritocracy and justice in admission systems become particularly relevant (Boliver et al., 2022; Killgore, 2009; Villalobos et al., 2017). Merit continues to operate as a central organizing principle of access, legitimizing differences that are often interpreted as the outcome of individual effort rather than the result of accumulated social advantages (Liu, 2011; Mijs, 2016; Reay, 2020). It is also important to critically examine the rhetoric of "free choice" that underlies transitions to HE, which tends to assume that young people act as fully rational agents who understand the admission system and make decisions accordingly (Callender & Dougherty, 2018).

In 2010, a new Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES, for its acronym in Spanish), was enacted, grounded in the principles of democratization and equal opportunities. This reform guaranteed tuition-free access to public universities and established a rigorous system for evaluating the quality of HE institutions (Long et al., 2013). In this context, a new national admission system was implemented in 2012, establishing as its main admission criteria a standardized test score combined with high school grades, which together determine students' eligibility for different degrees and institutions.

In terms of outcomes, Ponce and Carrasco (2017) show that while the free tuition policy initially expanded university enrollment, coverage later declined after the introduction of merit-based admission criteria and the closure of low-quality universities. Similarly, Rivera (2019) finds that although free tuition improved access for women, ethnic minorities, and low-income groups, its democratizing effect weakened once merit and quality regulations were implemented. Salmi (2021) further concludes that tuition-free policies in Latin America have not substantially reduced inequality. Despite increased participation, access remains stratified, and the poorest groups continue to be underrepresented, with Brazil showing the most regressive effects, followed by Argentina, Ecuador, and Chile.

Nevertheless, evidence remains limited regarding how inequalities in access to HE are configured when considering hierarchies and differences among institutions and programs of varying prestige, quality, and selectivity within the system. Building on this gap, the aim of this article is to analyze the effect of socioeconomic inequality on HE admission scores and on the choice of highly selective institutions and degree programs in Ecuador. Given that the choice process is multidimensional and socially embedded (Ball et al., 2002) the analysis also considers other factors beyond socioeconomic origin, such as gender, non-traditional educational trajectories, geographic location, and previous educational experiences (Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012; Morley & Lugg, 2009; Reay, 2018; Walther, 2006).

In this context, the study of vertical and horizontal inequalities in Ecuador is particularly relevant, as it enables an analysis not only of who gains entry to HE but also of the types of institutions and programs different social groups access, within a system that combines merit-based selection and affirmative action policies. Based on the above, this article provides evidence that problematizes the idea that the choice of highly prestigious and selective institutions or programs is solely determined by academic merit, arguing instead that students' decisions are shaped by multiple interrelated factors that make educational choice a socially mediated and structurally constrained process (Ball et al., 2002; Reay, 2018).

From this perspective, the article contributes to the comparative and international discussion on HE access policies, particularly in the Latin American context, by examining how merit-based admission frameworks and the individualized conception of choice operate within stratified systems. This analytical approach offers insights relevant to the design of more equitable admission policies in contexts where social justice and meritocratic principles coexist in tension.

The article is structured as follows. Section two discusses the global expansion of HE and its connection to persistent access inequalities, drawing on evidence from Latin America and Ecuador. Section three examines the notion of meritocracy and its link to admission systems, emphasizing their role in reproducing inequalities and creating barriers for disadvantaged students. Section four reviews theoretical approaches to educational choice that move beyond purely rational or structural explanations. Section five contextualizes the Ecuadorian case, describing the admission system and affirmative action policies. Section six details the methodological design, including data, variables, and analytical strategy. The final sections present the main results on vertical and horizontal inequalities, followed by the discussion and conclusions.

Higher Education Expansion and Social Inequalities

A widely documented trend in HE is the global expansion of enrollment (Marginson, 2016; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Although this process takes diverse forms and rhythms across political and economic contexts, participation has grown consistently worldwide, including in middle- and upper-middle-income countries (Marginson, 2016; McCowan, 2016). However, barriers to access persist both vertically and horizontally (Gerber & Cheung, 2008; McCowan, 2016). Vertical inequality refers to overall access and the availability of places, which may be influenced by factors such as the geographic distribution of institutions or the type of admission processes. In contrast, horizontal inequality concerns the distribution and choices made by students within the system, creating hierarchies of prestige, quality, or status among different institutions, fields, and degrees (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Gerber & Cheung, 2008; McCowan, 2016). In HE systems with high levels of participation, inequality concerns both who enters the system and the relative value of their position within it, which classifies as high-value, low-value, or exclusion (Marginson, 2016).

Following Trow's (1973) framework, Latin America's HE systems moved from elite to mass access during the 1980s and have now reached a stage approaching universal participation, defined as a gross enrollment rate exceeding 50% (Brunner & Labraña, 2020). In 2020, the region recorded a gross enrollment rate of 54.1%, with 29 million students enrolled and a 42% increase compared to 2010 (Brunner et al., 2024). A distinctive feature of this expansion is the weight of private enrollment, as the region has the world's highest share of students in private institutions (54%), with two of every three universities being private. In countries such as Chile, Brazil, Peru, and the Dominican Republic, private institutions dominate tertiary provision (Brunner et al., 2024).

Ecuador's gross enrollment rate reached 58% in 2020, placing it within the universal category of HE systems. Nonetheless, its expansion has been slower and more recent than in countries such as Chile or Argentina (Ferreyra et al., 2017; Post, 2011). One factor explaining this difference is the disparity between secondary school graduation (97%) and HE enrollment (58%), a 39-point gap compared with 28 points in Colombia and 5 in Chile (Brunner et al., 2024). This gap reflects a "bottleneck" (Torche, 2010) in the transition from secondary to HE, where the high levels of secondary graduation have not been matched by a corresponding expansion of HE capacity. As a result, the limited availability of university places continues to function as a structural source of inequality reproduction (McCowan, 2016). Complementing this, data from The Secretariat of Higher Education, Science and Technology of Ecuador (SENESCYT, for its acronym in Spanish) (2018–2022) show a persistent gap between applicants and admitted students, with the number of those unable to secure a place peaking in 2022 (Table 1). This may indicate the persistence of exclusionary barriers to HE, increasing competition and pressure for limited places.

Table 1

Applicants, Places, and Acceptances in HE in Ecuador (2018-2022)

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Applications (1st year)	168,823	176,689	173,138	166,332	215,300
Places (1st year)	89,849	86,585	114,241	95,241	122,623
Acceptances	81,847	79,649	108,968	87,425	100,831
Gap between applicants and acceptances	86,976	97,040	64,170	78,907	114,469

Note. Data from SENESCYT-SIAU (2018-2022)

In the first semester of the 2020 application process, most applications were concentrated in four public universities: the University of Guayaquil, the Central University, the Technical University of Manabí, and the National University of Loja, which together accounted for 58.1% of total applications. The subfields with the highest average minimum admission scores were Health (899.05), Architecture and Building (849.74), Law (827.30) and Veterinary Medicine (809.07). Although these subfields represent only 4 of the 26 subfields of knowledge defined by SENESCYT based on the UNESCO classification, they accounted for 30.4% of first-preference applications, revealing a strong concentration of demand within a small number of high-scoring disciplinary fields. Overall, applications clustered in a limited set of universities and fields of study, underscoring the competitive and selective nature of the system.

Another difference in the expansion of HE in Ecuador compared to the general regional trend is that, although a process of privatization of universities also took place, mainly during the 1990s (Long et al., 2013; Post, 2011), there has not been a greater concentration of enrollment in private institutions as in countries such as Brazil or Chile. Instead, public enrollment continues to predominate (Brunner et al., 2024). According to the Council of Higher Education (CES for its acronym in Spanish) (CES, 2025), Ecuador's HE system comprises 36 public universities, 8 partially subsidized private universities, and 20 fully self-financed private universities. Although the growth rate of private enrollment has been higher in recent years, with student numbers in fully self-financed universities increasing from 66,544 in 2015 to 131,546 in 2023, which represents a growth of approximately 98%, compared to an increase from 326,157 to 538,518 in public universities during the same period, equivalent to a 65% growth rate, the system remains predominantly public. As of 2023, 64% of total enrollment was concentrated in public institutions, 20.36% in partially subsidized private institutions, and 15.63% in fully self-financed private ones (SENESCYT, 2023).

The predominance of public enrollment may relate to the 2010 HE reform (LOES), which tightened regulations on private universities and closed 14 that did not meet quality criteria (Long et al., 2013; Ramírez, 2016). However, the recent expansion of private enrollment may be related to the high selectivity of traditional public universities, as less selective private institutions tend to absorb students who do not gain admission to the public system, a pattern also observed in other Latin American countries (Valenzuela & Yáñez, 2022). Nonetheless, available data on private universities do not allow for a detailed analysis by institutional type or level of selectivity.

Vertical and horizontal barriers in access to HE have a stronger impact on students from low-income families, rural areas, migrant backgrounds, and culturally or socially underrepresented groups, including those with disabilities (Marginson, 2016). At the Latin American regional level, between 2000 and 2012, although the growth rate in access to HE was greater among the lowest income quintile than the highest (117% versus 24%) (Ferreyra et al., 2017), significant gaps remain, with an average difference of 40 percentage points in HE enrollment between the lowest and highest income quintiles (Brunner et al., 2024). Barriers to access also persist for students from rural areas and for those belonging to Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups (Valenzuela & Yáñez, 2022).

Regarding horizontal inequalities, a key challenge of the region's HE expansion is that much of it has occurred through low-quality programs. Evidence indicates that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to enroll in institutions, fields, or study programs of lower prestige, quality, and selectivity, often linked to lower labor market returns (McCowan, 2016; Valenzuela & Yáñez, 2022).

In Ecuador, the analysis conducted by Ponce and Carrasco (2017) shows that between 2006 and 2014 the participation of the five poorest deciles in university enrollment increased from 12% to 18%, while that of the richest decile declined from 32% to 25%. However, the largest increases were concentrated in the middle deciles (3, 5, and 6). The smallest increase occurred in the first and

second deciles, where the rise was less than one percentage point. Complementing this, the study by Guerrero et al. (2021), based on 2016 data, shows that socioeconomic status influences access to HE in Ecuador, since their results indicate that secondary school graduates from households with more highly educated heads and higher incomes have a greater probability of entering public HE institutions. In contrast, belonging to an ethnic minority or coming from the Coastal or Amazon regions significantly reduces the likelihood of access to these institutions.

Based on this review, it can be confirmed that access inequalities persist for the poorest and most socially disadvantaged groups. However, there is still a lack of evidence on the types of universities and degree programs these students enter. Following Marginson (2016), this raises the question of whether their access corresponds to high-value or low-value positions within the higher education system.

Meritocracy and Higher Education Admission Systems

One of the core concepts structuring access to HE is that of merit. The concept of meritocracy was popularized by Young (1958), who critically analyzed the dominant ideology of meritocracy in British society. Within the liberal principles of distributive justice, when equal conditions are created so that individuals can compete without being affected by inequalities of social origin, a meritocratic system can emerge. In such a system, competition is considered free and fair, serving as a mechanism for allocating positions within the social structure and thus enabling mobility (Mijs, 2016; Reay, 2020).

In this context, educational institutions perform a selective function by classifying and channeling students into different academic trajectories, socially legitimizing the placement of some in the most privileged routes or positions within the system while relegating others to less advantaged ones, in such a way that the process appears "natural" or "normal" (Bonal, 1998; Tarabini et al., 2022).

Building on this, admission mechanisms are established to select students, such as tests designed to measure aptitudes, capacities, and skills for university entry. These are conceived as neutral and objective selection instruments that evaluate students' abilities and performance (Alon, 2009; Liu, 2011).

Meritocracy articulates a principle of justice based on the distribution of rewards, where those with higher performance are considered to deserve greater benefits. This logic promotes competition and effort while legitimizing social differences (Mijs, 2016). As Reay (2020) points out, it also naturalizes privilege by framing elite positions as the result of merit rather than inherited advantages, functioning as a mechanism of class closure and exclusion.

For working-class students, mobility is framed through discourses of aspiration and individual choice. Exceptional cases of upward mobility reinforce the belief that meritocracy works, masking structural barriers (Reay, 2020). Those who fail to succeed are blamed for lacking effort, ability, or capacity (Liu, 2011; Mijs, 2016). This belief system also shapes young people's identities during their transition to HE, fostering a sense of over-responsibility for their own successes and failures within their educational trajectories (Reay, 2018).

Following this line of reasoning, empirical evidence from a cross-national study by Duru-Bellat et al. (2017) provides evidence that the dominant ideology in modern societies tends to legitimize inequality when it is perceived as the outcome of merit. In more unequal contexts, the tendency to justify social differences becomes stronger, as inequalities are seen as deserved, reinforcing their legitimization within public discourse. Consistent with this idea, in Latin America, high levels of inequality coexist with a widespread belief in merit-based success, leading poverty and

wealth to be interpreted as the result of personal effort or failure rather than structural conditions (Quaresma et al., 2024).

The literature has shown that merit-based admission systems reproduce social inequalities (Alon, 2009; Liu, 2011), because academic performance is shaped by differences related to class, gender, and ethnicity (Massey, 2006). Moreover, a key barrier to university access stems from selective admissions and the limited availability of places. In these systems, competition for the most selective programs leaves students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with fewer opportunities to secure admission (Alon, 2009; Boliver et al., 2015). In addition, when the competition for available places intensifies, selective institutions become even more exclusive, thereby further elevating the significance attached to admission exams (Alon, 2009).

In a context marked by the exclusionary effects of HE admission systems, policies of affirmative action have historically been developed and implemented to expand and make access to this level of education more equitable (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; McCowan, 2016; Villalobos et al., 2017). Regardless of their specific form, affirmative action represents a type of policy designed to redistribute opportunities toward women, ethnic and racial minorities, and other historically excluded groups (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007).

Affirmative action policies are based on distinct conceptions of social justice that reflect different understandings of equality. As Villalobos (2017) explains, the key distinction lies between equality of opportunity, which assumes fairness when formal access is open to all even if outcomes differ, and equality of outcomes or positions, which seeks to reduce social disparities by correcting structural disadvantages. In HE, this latter conception, grounded in the principle of corrective justice, has supported policies such as quotas, adjustments to admission criteria, scholarships, and differentiated admission processes tailored to specific groups or communities (McCowan, 2016).

Drawing on a 2018 survey in 71 countries, Salmi and D'Addio (2021) shows that most nations promote equity in HE through a mix of monetary measures such as scholarships, grants, and student loans, and non-monetary ones including affirmative action, reformed admission procedures, and outreach programs. The study concludes that the most effective policies are those combining financial support with actions that address non-financial barriers to access.

Educational Choices and the Reproduction of Inequalities in Access to Higher Education

As noted in the previous section, merit-based systems place strong emphasis on academic performance and standardized test scores as key admission criterion which often become barriers to access for socially disadvantaged groups (Liu, 2011; Massey, 2006; Reay, 2020). At the same time, these systems tend to conceptualize students as informed and rational agents who understand and navigate the system's rules when making educational choices (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Reay et al., 2001). From the standpoint of educational policy, students are therefore portrayed as "expert" decision-makers who are expected to possess the necessary information and to select the option that maximizes the balance between costs and benefits (Callender & Dougherty, 2018).

Educational choices and their relationship to the reproduction of inequalities in access to HE have been analyzed from two opposing theoretical perspectives. One perspective is rooted in cultural reproduction theories, which suggest that differences in cultural capital and class habitus contribute to disparities in academic performance and study choices. According to this approach, working-class students often underperform academically because their cultural capital is devalued within the educational system, which tends to favor the cultural capital of the dominant classes. Moreover, cultural capital influences the selection of educational options, framing it as a complex

process shaped by both structural factors and individual agency, rather than merely an individual decision-making process (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Reay et al., 2001).

On the other hand, rational action theory views decision-making as a rational balancing of costs, benefits, and expected success probabilities across different educational options. It explains inequalities through the direct primary impact of socioeconomic background on academic performance and a secondary effect on study choices, independent of academic performance. In this context, one of the main drivers of the study choice is risk aversion. Higher socioeconomic classes exhibit risk aversion to social decline, heightening their expectations of accessing top educational positions. Conversely, lower-class students often opt for less ambitious choices, despite high academic performance (Boudon, 1974; Jackson et al., 2007).

These theories have been regarded as conceptually opposed, since rational action theory assumes that decision-making involves an individual cost–benefit analysis, whereas cultural reproduction theory argues that choices are shaped by the extent to which class-based behaviors and dispositions align with the demands of the educational system (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014).

However, several approaches seek to integrate insights from both perspectives to explain transitions to HE and the configuration of young people's educational choices. Walther et al. (2015), propose the concept of structured choice to highlight the need for a hybrid perspective that reconciles structural, individual, and interactional factors shaping decision-making in non-linear and non-normative ways. Glaesser and Cooper (2014) combine Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, through the concept of habitus, with rational action theory, drawing on Goldthorpe's notion of subjective rationality. They argue that young people make decisions based on limited information and within the boundaries established by their habitus, which shapes what they perceive as viable or appropriate educational and occupational options.

An important contribution in this line of research is that of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), who propose a sociological theory of career decision-making that moves beyond both the social determinism of cultural reproduction theories and the notion of individuals as fully autonomous agents in rational choice models. They conceptualize career decisions as pragmatically rational, shaped by culturally defined horizons of action, where structural constraints and personal agency, including emotions and feelings, interact in complex ways.

Adopting a theoretical approach in which educational choices are understood as pragmatic, shaped by structurally determined horizons of action, offers a possible explanation for the extensive empirical evidence showing that students from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve high scores in HE entrance exams do not always access the most selective or prestigious institutions and programs. Instead, they tend to choose options of lower prestige, quality, or selectivity, despite their potential to enter more competitive ones according to meritocratic and rational choice logics (Ball et al., 2002; Boliver et al., 2022; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2011).

In the context of this study, barriers embedded in the admission system, such as limited places, high entry scores, and eligibility requirements, can also be understood as part of these horizons that shape students' choices according to their social background. Those from lower socioeconomic groups or without university-educated parents often lower their aspirations toward less selective options, perceiving greater difficulties in accessing competitive and prestigious programs (Finger, 2022), which can be understood as another delimitation of their horizons of possibility in the decision-making process.

The socioeconomic background is not the only variable that influences HE choices. It is a multifactorial process in which influences of different natures, such as the personal, family, peer group, community context, and institutional, are intertwined (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2001). In this way, several factors related to prior social and educational disadvantage influence the choice of

careers, institutions, or fields of study of low or high selectivity (Davies & Guppy, 1997), which reflects the reproduction of horizontal inequalities.

Evidence shows that women have increased their participation in HE and have improved their performance. However, the effect of gender in conjunction with other factors, such as race or social class, impacts women's lower college entrance scores and opportunities (Morley & Lugg, 2009).

University institutions' geographic location is also a relevant variable when accessing and choosing higher-level education (Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012; Mangan et al., 2010). Working-class students prefer to choose universities close to home, compared to students from more advantaged social classes that exert their choices nationwide (Reay et al., 2001).

Regarding students' educational trajectories, Walther (2006) points out that the transition to adulthood has become increasingly de-standardized, giving rise to a greater diversity of pathways. In this context, non-traditional educational trajectories, such as parenthood, delayed entry into HE, or combining study and work, represent alternatives to the linear transition from secondary to university education. Quantitative evidence shows that these trajectories are more frequent among socioeconomically and academically disadvantaged students and are associated with lower probabilities of entering highly selective institutions and completing HE (Milesi, 2010).

As for previous educational conditions, prior measured educational performance is an important predictor of the choice of selective fields of study and institutions (Davies & Guppy, 1997). In addition, other variables such as retention or non-repetition of courses determine greater access to HE and high-demand career choices at the university level (Ramírez López, 2019).

In merit-based admission systems, preparation for entrance examinations becomes a decisive factor that can ultimately determine access to HE. Participation in exam preparation courses tends to improve test performance but also reflects and reinforces social class differences, favoring students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Such preparatory courses operate not only as mechanisms that facilitate access but also as instruments that orient students toward more selective and prestigious fields of study (Kosunen et al., 2018; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2008).

In synthesis, one way to analyze the reproduction of vertical and horizontal inequalities is through understanding how socioeconomic background, life experiences associated with non-traditional educational trajectories, and previous educational conditions shape both academic performance in admission processes and students' choices of highly selective studies.

The Ecuadorian Context: Admission System and Affirmative Action Policy

In 2010, Ecuador approved a new Organic Law on Higher Education (LOES), which introduced significant reforms. The law ensured tuition-free access to public HE institutions and established a unified national admission system based on a standardized exam, regulated by the State. Prior to this reform, admissions were unregulated and depended on each university's criteria (Ramírez, 2016).

The new admission framework was founded on the principles of merit, equal opportunity, and freedom of choice (LOES, 2010, Art. 81). The university selection process is primarily based on the entrance examination and secondary school grades, although both components have undergone several regulatory changes since 2012, as each government administration has modified the rules of the system. These reforms have involved adjustments to the name of the exam, the institution responsible for its implementation, the competencies assessed (skills, abilities, capacities, or aptitudes), and the weighting system used to calculate final admission scores.

At a more specific level, between 2012 and 2023, the university admission system in Ecuador underwent five major changes.[1] Initially, the National Exam for Higher Education (ENES for its acronym in Spanish) was implemented to assess students' skills and served as a requirement for applying to HE institutions. In 2017, ENES merged with the Ser Bachiller exam, which also evaluated knowledge and functioned as the high school graduation test. Thus, students used the same exam to complete secondary education and to apply for HE. In 2020, the admission exam was once again separated from the high school graduation exam, and the Higher Education Admission Exam (EAES, for its acronym in Spanish) was introduced to assess both knowledge and aptitudes. In 2021, the *Transformar* exam was launched, focusing primarily on aptitude evaluation, and the weighting system used to calculate admission scores was adjusted. Since the first admission cycle of 2023, admission responsibilities have been transferred back to public universities, as was the case before the approval of the new LOES, while SENESCYT retained authority over admissions for technical, technological, pedagogical, arts, and music conservatory institutes. Public universities can determine the type of evaluation used for student selection, assessing either general or field-specific competencies and capacities. They can also incorporate other assessment methods, such as interviews or academic assignments. Each university determines the relative importance of these components according to the parameters established by SENESCYT (2018, 2019, 2021, 2023).

The admission score combines exam results and high school grades. In 2020, the exam accounted for 60% and school grades 40%. In 2021, the weighting shifted to 50% for each component. Under the latest 2024 regulation, institutions are responsible for conducting evaluations, maintaining both elements assessment of competencies or capacities, and high school grades (within ranges of 50–75% and 25–50% respectively). Although these procedural changes have modified how admission scores are calculated, the system continues to be grounded in a traditional merit-based approach, in which academic performance remains the principal criterion for university entry.

After receiving their scores, applicants select their preferred degree program, institution, modality, and campus, with up to five options allowed in 2020 and three options after the 2021 regulatory change (SENESCYT, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023).

The LOES (2010) also incorporates two complementary inclusion mechanisms within the admission system: an affirmative action policy (Art. 81) and a quota policy (Art. 74). Despite the numerous regulatory adjustments to the admission system, both measures have remained in force as rights guaranteed by law.

The affirmative action policy allows applicants from historically excluded groups to receive up to 50 bonus points on their admission score. Beneficiaries include students from the lowest income quintiles, rural areas, or those with disabilities; members of Indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, or Montubio ethnic groups; migrants; students with catastrophic illnesses;[2] and victims of sexual or gender-based violence.

This policy is complemented by a quota policy, under which public universities must allocate 5% to 10% of available places in each program to historically excluded groups, who apply within this specific admission category. In private universities, up to 10% of places per academic term must be

[1] The analysis of the admission system's characteristics in the present section was conducted based on a review of the Regulation of the National System for Leveling and Admission and its subsequent amendments issued through the following ministerial agreements by SENESCYT: Agreement No. SENESCYT-2022-043; Agreement No. SENESCYT-2019-137; Agreement No. SENESCYT-2018-096; Agreement No. SENESCYT-2023-0025; and Agreement No. SENESCYT-2024-0055.

[2] These chronic conditions pose significant risks and require costly, socially impactful treatments due to their prolonged or permanent nature. Examples include all types of cancer, brain tumors, and chronic renal insufficiency.

designated for students from vulnerable groups. These students receive scholarships covering 75% to 100% of tuition and fees to ensure their access, retention, and completion of studies (SENESCYT, 2024).

Another key feature of the system is that HE institutions may offer two types of admission slots: (a) Direct entry to the first academic term of the degree program; or (b) Career Leveling, which are preparatory programs designed to align students' skills with the entry requirements of their chosen field. These courses are not pre-admission training but rather constitute the first phase of the degree for students who have already met the minimum score requirements.

Additionally, there is a General Leveling Program aimed at supporting applicants who did not obtain a place in HE and wish to reapply. Earlier regulations (2019–2021) established that SENESCYT would fund universities to deliver these courses (SENESCYT 2019; 2020) However, under the most recent reform, universities must now offer them free of charge, without external funding (SENESCYT, 2024). The Secretariat also provides online preparatory materials covering verbal, logical, and numerical reasoning.

It is important to consider the implications of this admission system for applicants navigating the transition to HE. The multiple stages involved, together with at least five major regulatory reforms between 2012 and 2023, may constitute significant barriers, particularly in terms of access to information, guidance, and understanding of complex procedures.

From a comparative perspective on affirmative action policies, the findings of Villalobos et al. (2017) reveal important contrasts in how four Latin American countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and Ecuador) have designed initiatives to expand access for marginalized groups. Although all share the goal of promoting inclusion, they are grounded in distinct conceptions of merit and social justice. In Chile, the PACE program embodies a *situated meritocracy*, where students compete within their own schools rather than through national standardized exams. In Bolivia, merit is tied to applicants' community engagement; in Brazil, policies emphasize need and seek to diversify the student composition of universities, prioritizing *Black* and *mulato* students from low-income backgrounds; and in Ecuador, access combines a traditional meritocratic approach based on standardized exams with a need-based component that provides scholarships and financial assistance to disadvantaged students (Villalobos et al., 2017).

Methodology and Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative and cross-sectional approach to examine patterns of inequality in access to HE in Ecuador, in the context of the admission system implemented after the 2010 LOES. The analysis is informed by a sociological perspective on educational inequalities, emphasizing how students' social origin, life experiences associated with non-traditional educational trajectories, and previous educational conditions are related to both their academic performance (vertical inequalities) and their choices of HE institutions and programs (horizontal inequalities). In this context, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

a) How do students' socioeconomic background, life experiences, and prior educational conditions influence their performance in the HE admission process?
b) How do these factors shape students' choices of highly selective institutions and programs, regardless of test performance?
c) To what extent do the patterns of choice differ by socioeconomic or life experience factors, among high-achieving students?

Data

The data for this analysis was sourced from the SENESCYT, which includes information on all applicants to the public HE system. Additionally, data from the National Institute of Educational Evaluation (INEVAL, for its acronym in Spanish) Survey of Associated Factors was used to gather socio-economic, demographic, and educational details of the students. This study utilizes data from applicants for the first semester of 2020 (n=173,138). After merging with the Survey of Associated Factors variables, the number of cases with complete information for analysis decreases to 68,479.

This reduction is primarily due to the following factors: a) Some applicants retake the exam, resulting in outdated or incomplete social information stored in the databases from their initial exam attempt; or b) Not all students respond to every survey question, leading to cases with insufficient response levels being excluded in favor of those with more comprehensive information on study variables.

A descriptive analysis of the valid cases shows that the proportions and distributions of study variables are representative of the overall population. Moreover, the mean application scores of students in the valid cases closely match those of the overall population, differing by only 1 point.

Analysis Strategy and Variables

To analyze vertical inequalities, mean scores of HE applicants were compared across various student groups based on socioeconomic variables, life experiences, and previous educational conditions. The mean difference with ANOVA test were utilized to assess the significance level of these comparisons.

For this analysis the dependent variable is the application score for accessing to HE (60% exam score and 40% secondary school marks). In addition, the final score may include the affirmative action policy bonus that can provide up to 50 additional points to beneficiaries of this policy. The variable ranges from 590 to 1000 to points. The mean score is 762.7, with a minimum value of 590 and a maximum value of 1000. The standard deviation is 75.6, indicating a moderate level of variability in application scores among candidates.

Second, to study horizontal inequalities in the HE admission system context, three binary logistic regression models were estimated to examine which variables have a greater influence with the likelihood of choosing institution/degrees with high selectivity. The first model analyzes the effect of socioeconomic background and life experience variables. The second model includes previous educational conditions as additional predictors, while the third, complete model incorporates the HE application score as an explanatory variable.

All models assume that the relationships between independent and dependent variables are statistically identifiable and that residuals are independent and randomly distributed. To verify that these assumptions were met, the main conditions for the application of binary logistic regression were reviewed. The bivariate correlations between the dependent variable and each independent variable, estimated using Pearson's coefficient, were generally low. The highest correlation was observed with students' academic performance (0.315), followed by having a mother with no or only primary education (-0.115). These values are considered acceptable since they are below 0.5. A similar pattern was observed among the independent variables, where most correlations did not exceed 0.4, suggesting the absence of problematic multicollinearity.

Residual analysis was also conducted to identify potential outliers or anomalous predictions. Only 348 such cases were detected, representing 0.5% of the total sample. Given this small proportion, it was not necessary to exclude them from the analysis.

Binary logistic regression models were employed, utilizing a dichotomous dependent variable denoting the selection of highly selective versus non-highly selective institutions/degrees. The

variable was created by combining the minimum score required for admission to a specific degree, at a specific institution, and within a specific study shift (daytime or evening). This combination resulted in 1,457 distinct degree–institution options, each with an associated minimum cut-off score that represents the lowest score of admitted students from the previous admission period. This construction makes it possible to capture the diversity of admission requirements across the Ecuadorian HE system, as the level of selectivity varies both between institutions and across degrees within the same institution.

For example, in the admission period analyzed (first semester of 2020), the Medicine degree required a minimum cut-off score of 962 points at the University of Guayaquil, 933 points at the Central University, and 875 points at the Technical University of the North, all measured on a 1000-point scale. This illustrates how the same field of study can display different levels of selectivity depending on the institution, and that within a single university there may also be degrees with different admission thresholds.

From this information, a continuous scale of selectivity scores ranging from 478 to 985 points was obtained. To dichotomize this variable for use in the logistic regression, the K-means clustering technique was applied to group cases according to their similarity of means, resulting in a binary variable distinguishing between highly selective and non-highly selective degrees. To dichotomize the variable for use in the logistic regression, the K-means technique was used, which allows cases to be grouped according to their similarity of means. The variable was dichotomized for consistency with previous literature on HE choices and access to highly selective programs, which commonly relies on admission cutoff scores to operationalize institutional selectivity (Davies & Guppy, 1997). Additionally, it is observed that some studies in this field focus on analyzing the probability of choosing such programs; therefore, categorical variables suitable for binary or multinomial logistic regression models are typically employed (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Ramírez López, 2019).

As a result, the dependent variable classifies students into two categories based on their choice of academic institutions/degrees as determined by the cut-off scores required to apply to them. On the one hand, 32.40% of students (n = 22,157) chose highly selective institutions or programs that require higher scores for admission, within the range of 840 to 985. On the other hand, 67.60% of students (n = 46,322) chose non-highly selective institutions or programs with cutoff scores ranging from 478 to 839.

In the first semester of 2020, the most selective subfields (scores over 840) were health, architecture, construction, veterinary medicine, and business administration. In contrast, fields with scores below 840 points, which also attract a high number of applications, are education, social sciences, engineering, ICTs, and agronomy.

Finally, to explore whether the choices of students with high levels of academic achievement differ according to socio-economic background and life experiences variables, we used the Chi-square test to compare whether there were significant differences in the distribution of students according to such criteria. This group had a mean score of 923.5 points, that corresponds to the top quintile of the application scores.

The independent variables of the study are grouped as follows, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Independent Variables Description

Dimension	Variable name	Categories
Socioeconomic and structural background	Sex	Woman
		Male
	Location	Institution/degree same residence province
		Institution/degree different residence province
	Student's mother's educational level	No education or primary education
		Secondary education
		Higher education
	Applicant type	Affirmative Action
		General Population
Life experiences related with non-traditional educational trajectories	Parenthood	Student with children
		Student without children
	Work	Working student
		Non-working student
	Time of application	Recent secondary school graduates
		Not recent secondary school graduates
Previous educational conditions	Preparation for the HE admission exam	No exam preparation
		Self-preparation or in a government platform
		School preparation
		Private preparation
	Grade repetition	Repeated at least one grade
		No repeated grades

Note. Own elaboration

Results

To analyze how the student's academic performance influences their choice of studies, we use the HE application score, which combines secondary school marks with the entrance exam score.

Vertical Inequalities through HE Application Scores

To address the first research question, how students' socioeconomic background, life experiences, and prior educational conditions relate to their performance in the HE admission process, the mean difference test was applied to examine whether these variables generate significant differences in HE application scores.

Table 3 presents variations in average scores across different student characteristics. Socioeconomic factors, particularly parenthood and the mother's educational level, have a significant impact on HE access scores. Students without children scored on average 34.5 points higher than those with children, while women achieved slightly higher scores than men (8.5 points on average). The effect of having children is stronger for women, who show larger score gaps than men in comparable situations.

Mother's educational level, as a measure of cultural capital and socioeconomic background, also shows marked disparities. Students whose mothers have HE scored on average 32.8 points higher than those whose mothers had no education or only primary education. Applicants benefiting

from affirmative action policies scored 10.6 points higher than general applicants, reflecting the bonus score assigned to this group and its potential to mitigate access inequalities.

Table 3

Mean Differences in the Application Score

Life experiences and socioeconomic background	**%**	**Mean**
Sex		
Woman	57.6	766.3*
Male	42.4	757.8*
Parenthood		
Student with children	13.8	732.93*
Student without children	86.2	767.52*
Applicant type		
Affirmative Action	33.4	769.8*
General Population	66.6	759.2*
Work		
Working student	34.6	755.12*
Non-working student	65.4	766.81*
Location		
Institution/degree same residence province	81.7	758.05*
Institution/degree different residence province	18.3	783.75*
Time of application		
Recent secondary school graduates	56.4	770.84*
Not recent secondary school graduates	43.6	752.30*
Mother's educational level		
No education or primary education	48.1	753.5*
Secondary education	35.7	764.5*
Higher education	16.2	786.3*
Previous educational conditions variables	**%**	**Mean**
Preparation for the HE admission exam		
No exam preparation	5.1	747.3*
Self-preparation or in a government platform	53.4	761.8*
School preparation	29.8	760.8*
Private preparation	11.7	778.3*
Repeat one or more grade in secondary school		
Repeated at least one grade	5.5	729.3*
No repeated grades	94.5	764.7*
***Nº* Total**	**68,479**	**762.7**

Note. *Significant mean differences between groups at 0.05 and 0.01 with ANOVA test.
Own elaboration with applicants to HE database of SENESCYT 2020.

Other conditions such as working, residing in the same province as the chosen institution or degree, and applying later in the HE admission system are associated with lower mean scores, suggesting that non-traditional educational trajectories negatively affect performance.

Regarding previous educational conditions, students who repeated at least one grade during secondary school scored on average 35.4 points lower than non-repeaters. Those who prepared for the HE admission exam in a private course obtained 31 points more than those who did not prepare. The type of preparation reveals another dimension of economic inequality, as access to private exam preparation depends on students' financial resources. Preparation at school or through the public self-preparation platform is associated with lower scores than the overall average, suggesting a limited alignment between secondary education and the requirements of the HE admission process. Although the system offers free public preparation platforms, these appear insufficient to equalize outcomes, as students who prepare privately achieve higher scores. This pattern may reveal a subtle process of privatization within a formally public system (Kosunen et al., 2018; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2008).

The findings align with analyses conducted in other countries in the region, such as Chile, where university selection tests are influenced by individual-level factors such as gender, parental education, family income, type of school, and previous school performance (Contreras et al., 2007).

Horizontal Inequalities through HE Choices

To address the second research question, how socioeconomic background, life experiences, and previous educational conditions influence students' choices of highly selective institutions or degrees, three logistic regression models were estimated to examine the determinants of choosing highly selective versus non-selective degrees or institutions. The models were specified sequentially to assess the contribution of each set of variables. Model 1 includes life experience and socioeconomic background; Model 2 adds students' previous educational conditions; and Model 3 presents the full specification by incorporating the HE application score.

Model 1 in Table 4 shows that all life experience and socioeconomic background variables significantly affect the likelihood of choosing a highly selective institution/degree. Only being female has a positive effect, increasing the odds of choosing a highly selective option by 63.2% relative to being male. Parenthood is the most influential variable, as students with children are 54% less likely to choose highly selective institutions/degrees than those without. A student's mother's educational attainment is the second most significant variable affecting the likelihood of choosing a highly selective institutions/degrees, with a 49.5% lower chance for students whose mothers have no or primary education compared to those with higher-educated mothers.

Applying to HE immediately after secondary school increases the likelihood of choosing a highly selective institution/degree by 29.7%, while students who choose institutions or degrees in their own province are 20.7% less likely to do so than those who apply to other provinces. This pattern may reflect a tendency to prioritize proximity over prestige when selecting HE options (Mangan et al., 2010). Belonging to the affirmative action group also has a negative effect on choosing highly selective options, although its magnitude is smaller than other variables.

In Model 2, which adds previous educational conditions, attending a private preparation course increases the likelihood of choosing a highly selective institution/degree by 8.7%. In contrast, not preparing for the exam decreases the probability by 14.3%, and repeating a grade during secondary school reduces it by 27.6%. Despite including these educational variables, life experience and socioeconomic background factors remain significant, with similar magnitudes to Model 1. This highlights how previous schooling conditions reinforce inequality within the HE system (Tarabini et al., 2022).

Model 3 incorporates the HE application score to test whether the effect of life experience variables, socioeconomic background and previous educational conditions have an independent effect on the probability of choosing institutions/degrees with high selectivity, allowing us to observe the secondary effects of social inequality on the choice of institutions/degrees.

Table 4

Factors Influencing Probability of Choosing Highly Selective Institution/Degree

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)
Life experiences and socioeconomic background						
Woman (Ref: Male)	0.49	1.632**	0.48	1.617**	0.43	1.542**
Student with children (Ref: Student without children)	-0.78	0.46**	-0.74	0.475**	-0.54	0.583**
Working student (Ref: Non-working student)	-0.15	0.862**	-0.14	0.87**	-0.15	0.864**
Institution/degree same province (Ref: institution/degree different province)	-0.23	0.793**	-0.22	0.801**	-0.03	0.967
Not recent secondary school graduates (Ref: Recent secondary school graduates)	-0.35	0.703**	-0.41	0.661**	-0.27	0.761**
Affirmative Action (Ref: General population)	-0.15	0.858**	-0.14	0.871**	-0.26	0.768**
Mother with no education or primary education (Ref: Mother with HE)	-0.68	0.505**	-0.67	0.516**	-0.46	0.634**
Mother with secondary education (Ref: Mother with HE)	-0.39	0.679**	-0.38	0.687**	-0.24	0.787**
Previous educational conditions variables						
Repeated at least one grade in secondary school (Ref: No repeated grades)			-0.32	0.724**	-0.09	0.912*
No entrance exam preparation (Ref: Self-preparation/public platform)			-0.15	0.857**	-0.05	0.95
Private preparation (in a course or HEI) (Ref: Self-preparation/public platform)			0.08	1.087**	0.01	1.019
School preparation for the entrance exam (Ref: Self-preparation/public platform)			-0.19	0.83**	-0.13	0.877**
Academic results						
HE application score					0.008	1.008**
Cox y Snell R square	0.054		0.057		0.122	
Nagelkerke R square	0.076		0.079		0.17	
N	68,475					

Statistical significance levels * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$

Note. Own elaboration with applicants to HE database of SENESCYT 2020.

The HE application score has a significant impact, with odds of choosing highly selective institutions/degrees increasing by 1.008 times for each one-point increase in the score. Despite including this variable, the significance of life experiences and socioeconomic background variables persists, except for the student's place of residence. This suggests that the decision to change residency for HE is more influenced by the application score. Comparing the geographic variable's effect across the three models indicates that proximity to residence is associated with selecting less selective institutions/degrees, while the application score holds greater weight in choosing highly selective options.

Variables related to exam preparation lose significance in this model, but repeating a grade in secondary school and preparing for the exam at school continue to have negative effects. This indicates that academic performance outweighs the impact of previous educational conditions, while socioeconomic and life experience factors maintain their influence.

HE application scores have the greatest impact on explaining the variance in the dependent variable, resulting in a significant increase in square R. However, variables such as having children and the mother's educational level still exert a significant and negative effect on the likelihood of choosing highly selective institutions/degrees, independently influencing academic choices. This effect is especially evident among students benefiting from affirmative action policies, who receive a score bonus in university applications, leading to higher mean scores compared to the general population. Nevertheless, they also demonstrate a lower probability of choosing highly selective institutions/degrees, even after considering the score effect in logistic regression.

These findings align with studies in the Latin American context. For instance, Canales (2016) explores the factors influencing application decisions within the Chilean university system, revealing that the most significant factors include entrance exam results, parental education, and applicants' educational expectations. Similarly, Ramirez López (2019) demonstrates that characteristics such as being female, older than 19, having parents with HE, timely completion of previous education levels, and high academic performance increase the likelihood of selecting high-demand degree programs.

High-Achieving Students and Horizontal Inequalities

To address the third research question, which examines whether high-achieving students' choices differ according to their socioeconomic background and life experiences, a descriptive analysis was conducted for applicants with an average application score of 923.5 points or higher. In this subgroup of 6,300 students, score differences across socioeconomic and life experience variables were minimal, indicating a narrower range of variation compared to the general population. Small mean differences were observed by gender, work status, mother's educational level, and province of application. However, some significant gaps remained: students without children scored 5.9 points higher than those with children, affirmative action applicants 6.9 points higher than general applicants, and recent secondary school graduates 17.1 points higher than non-recent graduates.

Given these small differences in performance, one might expect similar preferences for highly selective institutions/degrees across study groups, indicating the absence of secondary effects. However, Table 5 shows that even among high-achieving students, life experiences and socioeconomic background continue to influence these choices.

Table 5 confirms the trends observed in the logistic regression models from Table 4. Women with high academic performance tend to favor highly selective institutions/degrees more than men (14.1% difference). The presence of children also affects choice, as students without children are 24.7% more inclined to select highly selective institutions/degrees. Additionally,

students whose mothers have HE opt for highly selective institutions/degrees by a difference of 14.1% compared to those with less-educated mothers.

Students who opt for highly selective institutions or programs outside their province outnumber those who choose options within their province by 6.5 percentage points. This data, supplemented by the logistic regression models, suggests that changing provinces becomes a viable option when applicants achieve HE entrance scores that enable them to apply to highly selective institutions/degrees.

Affirmative action students, in the high-performing group, choose highly selective institutions/degrees less frequently than the general population (4.8 percentage points difference).

Table 5

Variations in Highly Selective Institution/Degree Choices among High-Achieving Students

	Highly selective institutions/degrees	**Non highly selective institutions/degrees**	**Total**
Sex*			
Woman	71.7%	28.3%	100%
Male	57.6%	42.4%	
Parenthood*			
Students with children	42.6%	57.4%	100%
Students without children	67.3%	32.7%	
Applicant type*			
Affirmative Action	63.5%	36.5%	100%
General population	68.3%	31.7%	
Work*			
Working student	60.9%	39.1%	100%
Non-working student	68.3%	31.7%	
Location *			
Institution/degree same province	64.8%	35.2%	100%
Institution/degree different province	70.5%	29.5%	
Time of application*			
Recent secondary school graduates	64.1%	35.9%	100%
Not recent secondary school graduates	81.6%	18.4%	
Mother's educational level*			
No education or primary education	59.6%	40.4%	100%
Secondary education	68.1%	31.9%	
Higher education	73.7%	26.3%	
N			**6,300**

*Significant differences between groups with chi-square at 0.01 and 0.05.

Note. Own elaboration with applicants to HE database of SENESCYT 2020.

Non-recent secondary school graduates, despite obtaining lower mean scores than recent graduates among high academic achievers, show a greater tendency to choose institutions or programs with high selectivity (17.5 percentage points difference). This contradicts the logistic regression findings, indicating a lower probability for this group to opt for high-selectivity options. It suggests that within this group, delaying application to the system may be a strategy to better prepare for the exam and take on more risk to secure admission in more selective university programs.

These findings confirm that horizontal inequalities persist even among the highest-performing students, reflecting how social origin and life experiences continue to shape educational choices beyond academic merit.

Discussion and Conclusions

The expansion of HE in Ecuador aligns with global and Latin American trends in broad terms, yet it also exhibits distinctive national characteristics. The country's HE growth has been characterized by a predominantly public enrollment structure, which can be seen as an advantage in promoting democratization and inclusion. However, the evidence also reveals a persistent gap between high school graduates and those who enroll in HE. In recent years, the number of applicants unable to secure a place has increased, suggesting that the system may be generating new barriers to access related to limited capacity and growing competition for available spots. Furthermore, the expansion of HE has not produced significant improvements in the inclusion of socially disadvantaged groups (Guerrero et al., 2021; Rivera, 2019; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021)

In this context, this study provides evidence of both vertical and horizontal inequalities in access to Ecuador's HE system, which operates through a model that gives significant weight to academic merit while also incorporating mechanisms to support historically excluded groups through affirmative action policies. The results show that these inequalities are shaped by students' life experiences, socioeconomic background, and prior educational conditions, all of which influence both their application scores and their likelihood of enrolling in highly selective institutions or degrees. These forms of exclusion operate within a particular admission system that, while grounded in principles of democratization, is also shaped by social conditions that affect how students engage with it. In this sense, the very configuration of the system—along with its multiple reforms—may function as an additional barrier, as navigating its procedures can be particularly challenging for socially disadvantaged groups (Finger, 2022). The study therefore contributes to advancing understanding of the mechanisms through which social origin continues to structure educational opportunities, even in systems that formally promote inclusion. Moreover, by providing empirical evidence from Ecuador on a merit-based admission system operating within a context of social inequality, similar to other HE systems in Latin America, it enriches international debates on equity and access in HE.

From a methodological standpoint, the analysis focuses on individual-level factors that connect applicants' choices to their social conditions. The variables examined capture social conditioning elements such as socioeconomic background, life experiences associated with non-traditional educational trajectories, and prior educational conditions, but they are analyzed at the individual level rather than through aggregated data at the institutional or system level. While these factors offer valuable insights into patterns of inequality, they are not sufficient to capture the full structural complexity of the HE system. Future research should therefore integrate systemic and institutional dimensions such as the characteristics of secondary and HE institutions, quality indicators, and funding structures to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that reproduce inequality in access to HE.

Regarding vertical inequalities, variables related to life experiences and socioeconomic background consistently produce disparities across all analyses. The mother's educational level, particularly when it is low, significantly contributes to these gaps, supporting the notion of primary effects in the reproduction of educational inequality, whereby socioeconomic background shapes academic outcomes (Jackson et al., 2007) In turn, non-traditional educational trajectories, such as parenthood, employment, or delayed entry into HE further widen score differentials, consistent with theories that emphasize the interaction between social background and life-course conditions in shaping educational outcomes (Walther, 2006).

In this same line, an interesting finding concerns exam preparation. Although the policy offers general leveling courses, private preparation has a stronger effect on admission scores, which can be understood as a new form of privatization through which socioeconomic disparities are reproduced. (Kosunen et al., 2018; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2008).

Concerning horizontal inequalities, the significant effect of variables such as the mother's educational level and other indicators of social disadvantage can be interpreted through the lens of cultural reproduction theory, which posits that educational choices are influenced by class habitus and variations in cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). At the same time, the persistence of life experience and socioeconomic background effects, even when academic performance is controlled for, aligns with the concept of secondary effects (Jackson et al., 2007). This pattern is especially evident among applicants benefiting from affirmative action policies, who, despite achieving higher average scores than the general population, are still less likely to apply to highly selective institutions or degrees.

Complementing the previous discussion, this result can be interpreted beyond rational choice theories. The fact that social class continues to influence educational decisions, regardless of academic performance or HE application scores, suggests that choices are constructed within a horizon of possibilities defined by structural constraints. Educational decisions are therefore more pragmatic than systematic -shaped by what seems possible and realistic within a socially defined horizon of opportunities, rather than by a rational comparison of all available options-, what Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) describes as pragmatically rational, since they are made with partial information and are deeply influenced by family, culture, and personal histories. Consequently, many students avoid fields perceived as inaccessible or incongruent with their social identity, such as science or elite professional programs, which they see as "not for people like them" (Reay et al., 2001; Reay, 2018).

This provides a theoretical account of the effects of social background on educational choices. However, to better understand how disadvantaged yet high-achieving students construct the meaning of their decisions, further qualitative research is needed to capture how their agency operates as a form of pragmatic rationality, shaped and bounded by structures of possibility rather than by unrestricted choice. It is also essential to examine qualitatively how, under merit-based admission systems, students build their sense of self and aspiration around dominant ideas of success, failure, and deservedness (Reay, 2018).

These notions can influence how they interpret their achievements and limitations within HE, particularly among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Understanding how students internalize meritocratic discourses can shed light on the subtle ways in which such systems reinforce structural forms of misrecognition, influencing both their sense of belonging and the perceived legitimacy of their educational choices.

Drawing on the results of this study, one can also reflect on the conceptions of justice underpinning Ecuador's HE admission system and other comparable contexts, where merit-based requirements coexist with compensatory mechanisms such as affirmative action and quota policies.

As shown in the results, these measures raise the average application scores of the most socially disadvantaged students, contributing to a reduction in vertical inequality. However, the system's underlying logic has not necessarily addressed justice of outcomes or positions, since the additional score does not translate into these students choosing more selective or prestigious degree programs. While a quota policy seeks, in principle, to redistribute positions by reserving places for disadvantaged students across all types of programs, their choices remain constrained by social conditions. Consequently, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to apply to highly selective programs, reinforcing social inequalities through positional stratification within the HE system.

Although the system has undergone several reforms since its implementation in 2012, these changes have not altered the traditional meritocratic conception that underpins the admission process. Most modifications have focused on adjusting the weighting of scores or redefining what entrance exams measure, whether knowledge, skills, or competencies, without transforming the underlying logic of merit-based selection. In the most recent reform of 2024, the responsibility for admissions was transferred back to universities, under general national guidelines that require them to apply some form of competency or aptitude test and allow the inclusion of interviews or academic essays. However, the mechanism itself remains essentially the same, now with less state regulation, which may create new barriers as universities can determine the level of difficulty of their assessments and become even more selective.

In this regard, and drawing on the reviewed literature, programs such as PACE in Chile illustrate an alternative approach based on the notion of *situated meritocracy* (Villalobos et al., 2017). This model engages students during their final years of secondary education, evaluates their academic performance in relation to their school context rather than national standardized tests, reserves places for them in participating universities, and provides continuous guidance and support during their transition to HE. It has also gained legitimacy within neoliberal and meritocratic discourses by linking the recovery of public education with the idea of HE as a social right (Miranda-Molina & Leyton, 2024).

Given this situation, it could be argued that, in addition to the existing affirmative action and quota measures, there is a need for a policy grounded in a broader conception of justice. Such an approach should consider the support provided to students from earlier educational stages, before their transition to HE, based on the understanding that both academic outcomes and educational choices are socially shaped and closely related to students' identity formation and aspirations. Therefore, policies could be structured not only around the logic of the distributing of opportunities and positions, but also around the principles of recognition and representation (Fraser, 1999), or, as proposed by Lynch et.al (2021), from the perspective of relational justice.

This would imply informing, accompanying, supporting, guiding trough preparatory and bridging programs, and recognizing the diverse needs and realities that intersect in students' decision-making processes, rather than conceiving them through the individualizing lens of merit-based admission systems, which define them as "expert," informed, and rational decision-makers expected to navigate their choices according to cost–benefit calculations and meritocratic principles. Such an individualized approach obscures the structural and institutional conditions that shape students' real possibilities, transforming what is, in fact, a socially constrained process into an apparently free and rational act of choice (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Reay, 2018).

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