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Is Ecuador's Educational Revolution Discriminatory?

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The Ecuadoran government has begun the transformation of university entrance and academic processes, aimed at strengthening technology and science and selecting students who can qualify for university entrance based on their academic knowledge.

The government proposal, called the Educational Revolution, is being implemented in various phases, the first with the general support of the educational community. However, the consequences have been discriminatory for a wide group of prospective university students, especially those from the provinces or from campesino, indigenous, or Afro Ecuadoran families.

Free education, teacher evaluation, and university assessment

The government's initial measures to strengthen the educational system were centered on reducing the dropout rate in primary and secondary schools. They identified families' economic situation as the principal cause of student dropout, because the low-income families are unable to cover school costs, such as registration fees, school supplies, uniforms, and even contributions that schools demand under the formula of "co-management."

The government effort began by eliminating registration fees and prohibiting schools from demanding special contributions; then it designed a government-assistance program to provide books and uniforms in public schools. This increased the number of students in primary and secondary schools and reduced the dropout rate.

Immediately thereafter a process was begun to evaluate teaching personnel using examinations on general knowledge and especially in their subject areas. Psychological exams were also given to determine whether teachers had an aptitude for teaching. Teachers who did not pass the exams went to a training program after which they were again evaluated. Although the Unión de Educadores del Ecuador (UNE) protested, the examination process was imposed and teachers had to participate.

At the same time, teachers' salaries were raised and investments were made in modernizing the physical structures of the educational campuses.

This reform process did not reach indigenous and campesino areas, nor did it include the education systems in Afro Ecuadoran communities, which must continue with teachers who have no more than a high school education and schools that have inadequate structures for teaching. For example, some sectors of bilingual/intercultural education, which is in charge of education in the indigenous communities, must function with teachers who are paid US$150 a month. Since this salary is not enough to live on, they end up quitting their jobs, leaving it to parents to take turns providing the children's education.

When the teacher evaluations were finished, the government began evaluating universities by analyzing the curriculum, the physical infrastructure, and the education of teaching personnel.
The university evaluations were well received, since in recent years the number of universities has proliferated, but most did not meet the standards to be a university, and they had become businesses and diploma mills where it was possible to obtain an academic degree for a determined price.

Universities that were not deemed qualified had a year to take into account the observations from the Secretaría Nacional de Educación Superior, Ciencia y Tecnología (SENESCYT). Some did not pass the second process and had to close.

Students in universities that were not qualified, which were mostly distance-learning or semi-campus-based institutions, were left in limbo; they could not transfer to campus-based universities because they work and cannot afford to study full time.

**Entrance exams and professional placement**

The government's most controversial decision came in late 2011, when it decided that the SENESCYT would be in charge of evaluating university applicants and assigning the number of places per university and major, according to applicants' scores.

A pilot plan was carried out on Feb. 18, when 45,133 high school graduates took entrance exams for four universities and a technical institute. The applicants had to fill out a form when they registered listing five options for universities and majors so that, based on their scores, they could be assigned to a university and a major from among their options. The 500 highest-scoring applicants were offered scholarships.

The exam results, released on March 10, indicated that 19,763 high school graduates obtained places in a university. The number of spaces available in the pilot plan's participating institutions was 26,864, but SENESCYT only placed students who obtained the required score of 550 points.

Students whose score was above 800 points could enroll in the major and the university of their choice, while the others were placed according to a point system, without considering the student's place of residence or the institution's location, resulting in countless students being placed in a university far from the city where they live, further complicating their effort to obtain an education, since they would have to pay for housing away from their home.

**Campesinos, indigenous, and Afro Ecuadorans discriminated against**

The pilot plan's results uncovered the reality of the educational system in the country, since high school graduates are not prepared to take these types of exams, especially students from provincial high schools or poor neighborhoods, or from the bilingual-education systems.

"This plan prioritizes private high schools where they educate only those who can pay," said Laura Peñafiel president of the Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios del Ecuador (FEUE).

The reform would also limit the possibilities to train new indigenous and campesino leaders, since their secondary school studies are in the bilingual-education systems, which, because of their inadequacy, will not prepare the students to finish high school with the ability to compete for a university space. Afro Ecuadoran young people find themselves in a similar situation.

"An indigenous leader takes eight years on average to obtain an academic degree, because they must not only overcome academic obstacles but must also condition education on their scarce
resources; but in the end, they are able to graduate. With this new system, they will not only be unable to graduate but they will not even be able to enter the university," said Marcos Martínez, former delegate to the Asamblea Constituyente.

The university system is also beginning to favor technical degrees, neglecting the social professions, which grassroots-organization leaders tend to enter.

Despite the results, the system was implemented for all universities, and a new evaluation process will be held on April 28, in which 70,000 high school students are expected to take the entrance exam.

Meanwhile, the FEUE has petitioned the Juzgado Tercero de lo Civil in Guayas for a protective order, alleging that the system violates the right to education and is contrary to constitutional precepts in effect since 2008. "The FEUE will continue struggling and mobilizing for free admission to universities," said Peñafiel.

Meanwhile, the government has not presented any option for overcoming the deficiencies in secondary education. "To cure the body, the government has opted to cut off the head," said Martínez.

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