

Access of rural youth to higher education: An international perspective

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Abstract: This is a review of empirical studies with the objective of analyzing the theoretical-practical discussions that have been raised internationally to deepen the understanding of the access of rural youth to higher education as an object of study. For this purpose, a narrative review was designed, considering scientific articles published in three different languages and concerning studies conducted in 21 different countries in all regions of the world. The results reveal three discussions: a) the strong interest that higher education has regained in the life expectations of rural young people and their families, especially as a means of social advancement; b) the inequalities that most affect the access of rural youth to higher education are the lack of academic offerings in rural areas and the discontinuities that occur around rural socio-cultural capital; c) since the inequalities experienced by rural youth are diverse, actions to promote greater democratization cannot be limited to implementing systems of grants and scholarships. It is concluded that the major project consists of creating a differentiated higher education model that, in terms of location, academic offerings, recognition of knowledge, and articulation with the environment, allows rural youth to experience their professional training not as an inevitable process of acculturation, but as a continuation of their socio-cultural capital and their territorial yearnings.

Keywords: educational systems; educational path; social justice; rural-urban gaps; college grants

1. Introduction

The expansion of higher enrollment is a phenomenon that gained momentum worldwide during the second half of the 20th century and whose consolidation through social policies has favored the admission of many young people to higher education institutions. However, this has not been synonymous with democratization and equity; there are still segments of the population for whom the continuity of their studies is a marginal issue. Rural youth is one of the groups that continues to experience serious disadvantages in tracing a complete educational path to the professional level.

The international literature shows that there are significant gaps in higher education entry rates between urban and rural youth. In Colombia, the main cities have a higher education transition rate of 43.7%, which contrasts with a rate of 28% in rural areas (Satzábal et al., 2021); likewise, 29.7% of urban young people aged 17 and older have attained a higher education degree, whereas only 5.1% of rural youths of the same age have achieved it (Lozano, 2019). In Peru, 23.9% of urban youths who finish high school enter a higher education institution, whereas only 13.3% of rural young people do so (León y Sugimaru, 2013). In Brazil, the children of parents with professional education have nine times more opportunities to access higher education than the children of rural employees and three times more than the children of rural entrepreneurs (Salata, 2028). In New Mexico, United States, there is a perceived 10

percentage point difference between urban and rural college-age youth entering an institution of higher education (Pruitt and Flores, 2021).

In Spain there is a gap of 12 percentage points between the urban and rural population between 25 and 34 years of age with higher education (Domínguez, 2022). In England, higher education institutions are located mainly in the central and urban areas, whereas the academic offer is almost nil in the rural areas of the western region of the country (Elliot, 2018). In Romania, 46.5% of the urban population between 25 and 34 years old has higher education, whereas only 9.2% of the rural population in the same age range has higher education (Titan et al., 2022). In Poland, there is a difference of almost 60 percentage points between urban and rural young people studying at the most prestigious universities in the metropolitan area and a difference of 26 points at the most prestigious regional universities (Antonowicz et al., 2022). In Russia, 66% of university students are in large cities, while only 16% are in small towns or rural areas (Prakhov and Bugakova, 2023).

In Egypt, 40% of university places are in the hands of the country's richest quintile (usually urban), whereas only 10% are distributed among the poorest quintile, which includes rural youth (Buckner, 2013). In Kazakhstan, there is a difference of 10 percentage points between urban and rural young people who achieve the highest level in standardized tests, which in equal proportion qualifies them for university entrance (Chankseliani et al., 2020). In China, there is a 27.4% asymmetry between urban and rural women entering the country's most prestigious universities.

As mentioned, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the lines of argument that have been put forward at the international level to deepen the understanding of the access of rural youth to higher education. This assumes that there is a growing social and academic interest in the need to include the rural population in higher education processes. Specifically, three discussions are developed: first, the study examines the strong interest that higher education has been regaining in the life expectations of rural youth and their families, especially as a means of social advancement; second, the idea that the difficulties of access to higher education are associated with a socioeconomic issue and that therefore the solution consists of implementing systems of grants and scholarships is dismantled; and, finally, the logic of the actions being implemented in different countries is examined, not only to expand enrollment but also to guarantee greater equity in the access of the rural population to higher education.

1.1. Tensions about the democratization of higher education

Not because it is in line with the ideal of a more just and democratic society, equity of access to higher education has been unanimously and unquestioningly received. On the contrary, there are aspects of the university ethos that seem to be in tension. For Karl Jaspers, the mission of the university consists of the unconditional search for truth and in contributing to the cultivation of the most lucid self-awareness in society; for José Ortega y Gasset, the purpose of the university is the education of men of science and the teaching of professions. In other words, the spirit of the university has gravitated around the production and appropriation of knowledge (Santos, 2012).

By the 1960s, the university of abstract goals exploded into a multiplicity of

sometimes contradictory functions (Santos, 2012). Aspects such as the demographic growth of cities, the demand for skilled labor, and the increase in basic education coverage, lead the university to assume a series of functions not necessarily related to its ethos, including contributing to the social advancement of disadvantaged groups. This multiplicity of functions threatens the idea of the university founded on free and disinterested research and the unity of knowledge (Santos, 2012).

From the beginning of modernity until the first half of the 20th century, the university was understood as a place to produce high culture and advanced scientific knowledge; its hegemony is based on the excellence of its cultural and scientific products, its high social prestige, and its predilection for the training of elites. However, due to the growth of functions, it ends up opening its doors to mass culture, increasing enrollment, and linking teachers from all social classes (Santos, 2012). This measure serves to attenuate the dichotomy between the high culture and the popular one while contributing to democratizing access. However, it gives rise to a new phenomenon: the emergence of elite universities and mass universities: the first ones continue to produce the knowledge of high culture, the second ones concentrate on its reproduction or their low-quality production (Santos, 2012).

For the same period, there are also two differentiated worlds: the illustrated world and the world of work. Whoever belongs to the former is exempt from the latter and whoever belongs to the latter is excluded from the former (Santos, 2012). Nevertheless, social demands and the conquest of socioeconomic rights led to education being understood not only as the transmission of high culture but also as education for work and the teaching of knowledge useful in the production scenario. In the meantime, labor, which was initially the use of physical force and the management of the means of production, also became an intellectual and skilled labor. The university's response is to try to reconcile humanistic education (high culture) and work training (popular culture). As a result of this measure, higher education institutions focused on the training of skilled labor for the industrial and business sectors began to proliferate (Santos, 2012).

Likewise, until the first half of the 20th century, the university aimed to produce superior, elitist knowledge to supply it to a small minority of young people, equally superior and elitist, in a classist institutional context that pontificated on society from the heights of its isolation (Santos, 2012). However, in the context of the struggle for socioeconomic rights in the second half of the century, it was questioned that higher education and high culture had become the prerogative of the upper classes, which led to the university gradually incorporating social groups that had been excluded until then. At that moment, the university ceases to seek only excellence and begins to seek democracy and equality, evidencing a clear incongruence between the principles of science and the principles of social justice.

As can be seen, the democratization of access to higher education, in terms of the recognition of mass culture, openness to excluded social groups, and the acceptance of work training, seem to undermine the ethos of the university as an institution oriented to the formation of high culture and the production of advanced scientific knowledge. For Santos (2012) the answer to this crossroads is to understand that since the end of the twentieth century, the university has been going through a period of crisis/transition, in which terms it is fundamental that it privileges moral-practical and

aesthetic-expressive rationality over cognitive-instrumental rationality; to procure a balanced development of the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. It is also important to promote the convergence of scientific and non-scientific knowledge and, therefore, to understand that social democratization implies epistemic democratization first.

1.2. Higher education as a public and social good

The Regional Conference on Higher Education for Latin America and the Caribbean, CRES (2018), proposes that higher education cannot be understood as a lucrative service, but as a human and people's right. Therefore, as a public and social good, a duty of the State. In this sense, the idea that higher education is a commercial good for private benefit, whose enjoyment requires demonstrating social and economic merit, is dismantled. Indeed, the CRES (2018) invites nation-states not to sign bilateral or multilateral free trade agreements that imply conceiving education as a lucrative service; prohibit for-profit higher education institutions and regulate the proliferation of private provision.

This concept is based on two premises: knowledge is a public good and higher education is a means of equalization and social advancement, not an area for the reproduction of privileges; it is therefore the responsibility of governments to guarantee universal access, permanence, and graduation for all citizens. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to broaden the academic offer in terms of the number and type of institutions, diversity of programs by area and level, and implementation of different modalities. The system of grants and scholarships for students coming from marginalized populations is an unavoidable necessity (CRES, 2018).

Regarding the ethos or mission of higher education institutions, the CRES (2018) is forceful in reaffirming their commitment to the cultural, political, artistic, economic, and technological transformation of societies. Also, to the contribution to the overcoming of inequalities and, therefore, the realization of scientific research with social relevance in articulation with professional training and projection towards the environment. This transcends the western paradigm of the abstract purposes of the university centered on the disinterested search for truth and the production of advanced scientific knowledge within the disciplines. On the contrary, it is necessary to recognize scientific knowledge as universal human right and collective rights of peoples, as social and common public goods for the sovereignty, good living, and emancipation of societies.

Higher education is thus called upon to guarantee a permanent dialogue with historical realities to contribute from its essence to the construction of a more just and equal society from the perspective of sustainable human development. It is precisely because of the above that greater autonomy is demanded in the exercise of a critical and propositional role vis-à-vis society without limits imposed by government policies, religious beliefs, the market, or interests (CRES, 2018).

Concerning the recognition and incorporation of historically excluded social groups, the challenge is not only to include indigenous people, afro-descendants, peasants and other culturally differentiated people into the dynamics of the institutions as they exist today, but to transform the entire organizational, epistemic, and

pedagogical structure of the institutions to make them more relevant to cultural diversity. Indeed, it is necessary to recover, revalue and protect traditional and ancestral knowledge within the framework of respect for diversity, epistemic equity, and dialogue of knowledge. For CRES (2018) the major challenge is not to guarantee everyone a place in higher education institutions, but to get the system restructured to a point where all social groups can experience their stay there not as an imperative of acculturation but as a process of assimilation.

2. Methodology

This is a narrative review that, as established by Popay et al. (2006), aims to build syntheses on the corpus of empirical research that addresses the same object of study. The design was organized in five stages: 1) definition of the object of study and formulation of the search criteria; 2) bibliography search in specialized databases; 3) identification and selection of studies; 4) corpus analysis; 5) description of results and conclusions (Arksey and O’Malley, 2005; Popay et al., 2006).

Defining “access of rural youth to higher education” as the object of the review, we proceeded to explore the literature using the following descriptors: ‘access of rural youth to higher education’ and ‘access to higher education in rural areas, and others. The scan was carried out in three languages (English, Spanish and Portuguese); in international databases (Clacso, Dialnet, Ebsco, Eric, Flacso, HDCA, Jstor, Latindex, Redalyc, Rimisp, Scielo, Springer and Taylor and Francis) and within an observation time window of the last 14 years (2010–2023). The studies collected referred to empirical research carried out in 21 different countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Ecuador, Egypt, España, United States, India, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, United Kingdom, Romania, Russia, and South Africa) (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Characterization of the reviewed studies.

Number of studies	The country where the study was conducted	Language of publication	Database
2	Argentina	Spanish	Redalyc y Scielo
1	Australia	Inglés	Springer
6	Brazil	Portuguese	Scielo y Ebsco
2	Chile	Spanish	Scielo y Redalyc
2	China	English	Eric y Springer
10	Colombia	Spanish	Dialnet, Scielo, Redalyc y Rimisp
2	Ecuador	Spanish	Ebsco y Latindex
1	Egypt	English	Jstor
1	Spain	Spanish	Dialnet
5	United States	English	Eric
1	India	English	Springer
2	Kazakhstan	English	Taylor and Francis
1	Mexico	Spanish	Latindex
2	Paraguay	Spanish	Flacso y Dialnet

Table 1. (Continued).

Number of studies	The country where the study was conducted	Language of publication	Database
5	Peru	Spanish	Redalyc, Clacso, Scielo, Rimisp y Dialnet
2	Poland	English	Springer
1	United Kingdom	English	Springer
2	Romania	English	Ebsco y Taylor and Francis
1	Russia	English	Taylor and Francis
1	South Africa	English	HDCA
50 studies	21 countries	Three languages	14 databases

As a result of the metadata review, the initial search resulted in a total of 62 documents, of which (after a more exhaustive review) reviews, theses, theoretical reflections, and systematic reviews were excluded, keeping only those that reported on empirical studies, in total: 57 documents. Subsequently, a critical analysis of each of the texts was carried out, seeking to determine their discursive focus, discarding those that focused on concomitant issues such as dropout, permanence, and graduation, but not on access to higher education, resulting in a final suitability or corpus of 50 documents (see **Figure 1**).

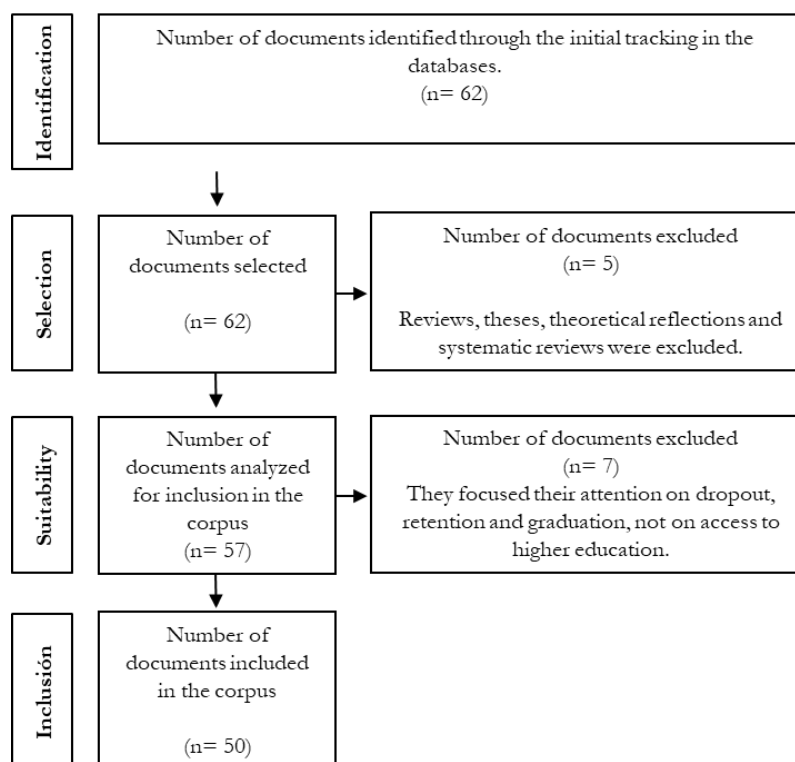


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart for corpus formation.

The analysis of the corpus was carried out through a detailed reading of each of the texts about the question: What are the main theoretical-practical discussions that have taken place at the international level regarding the access of rural youth to higher education? As a result of this exercise, three central categories or discussions emerged:

- 1) The place of higher education in the life expectations of rural youth and their families;
- 2) disadvantages experienced by rural youth in access to higher education;
- 3) implementation of actions to guarantee greater equity in the access of rural youth to higher education.

3. Results

The following results develop the theoretical-practical discussions that took place within each of the three central categories that emerged during the analysis process; although the studies reviewed correspond to local approaches, the intention is to look at higher-level conceptualizations that account for the field of study in theoretical and not only descriptive terms.

3.1. The place of higher education in the life expectations of rural youth and their families

Contrary to what may have happened in the past, the studies reviewed show the importance that education, particularly higher education, has regained in the life expectancy of rural youth and their families. The consolidation of basic education in rural areas has helped more and more young people to pursue higher education. Likewise, the precarious opportunities for growth and development offered by agricultural work for small and medium-sized farming families in many parts of the world have led young people to view vocational education as one of the most viable alternatives for their immediate future.

In this sense, Bogado et al. (2018) argue that today's rural youth manifest a marked disenchantment with the peasant lifestyle and that they yearn for higher education as a means of insertion into a more competitive labor market. Along the same lines, Gravilla et al. (2016) state that although educational gaps persist between the rural and urban areas, it is also true that for rural youth, higher education has become a fundamental link in their life project. Meanwhile, Grompone et al. (2018) express that among rural youth, the aspiration to become professionals in some area of knowledge has as its main purpose to be able to guarantee a better quality of life for themselves and their nuclear family.

Following the same line of argument, Ospina (2019) expresses that although school coverage in rural areas is decreasing as the level of education rises and the degree of rurality deepens, it must be recognized that higher education and obtaining a professional degree have become consolidated as the main aspirations of rural youth, even above the formation of a household or the achievements derived from agricultural activities. Following the above, Redin (2017) proves that today's rural families place a high value on their children's education, especially higher education; the advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the access of farmers' children to higher education have also made rural areas more dynamic in recent years, opening new prospects for social advancement.

In the same line, Urrutia and Trivelli (2018) highlight the significance for rural families that their children can experience a complete educational trajectory, including higher education, to accumulate more human capital and achieve social advancement. This is what Villegas (2016) refers to when he argues that the insertion of rural youth

in higher education has acquired a predominant relevance not only for the youth themselves but mainly for rural families in their ideal of advancement and social mobility. In the same sense, Wasielewski (2015) suggests that the increase in the rural population in higher education institutions is due to a change in the sociocultural worldview and the penetration of the paradigm of social ascent in this area. Finally, Zago (2016) emphasizes the value that higher education has regained among rural families mainly as a mechanism for social ascent and overcoming the level of backwardness that has historically stigmatized them.

As can be seen, there is international agreement on the high value of higher education today in the life aspirations of rural youth and families. This is certainly not a youthful or individual aspiration, but strongly driven by adults, who want a future with greater opportunities for their children. This is mainly due to the incorporation of the neoliberal paradigm of social mobility and advancement, accumulation of human capital, and overcoming poverty in rural areas. Likewise, this has been possible thanks to the very presence of schools in rural areas, access to technology by the rural population and the closing of material and symbolic distances between the rural and urban areas.

Thus, the consolidation of higher education among rural youth seems to be favoring a certain displacement in the axiological scale of the families and therefore encouraging the uprooting and longing for city lifestyles. Likewise, the rural population, which has usually been characterized by a stronger sense of social and communal values and a genuine concern for the common good, now seems to be migrating to a vision of individual development and progress. Significantly, the different studies emphasize the value of higher education as a way of social promotion and the absence of findings on how the continuity of higher education among young people can contribute to the strengthening of territorial values and local community development.

3.2. Inequalities experienced by rural youth in accessing higher education

The analysis of the inequalities experienced by rural youth in accessing higher education is the topic most frequently addressed in the studies reviewed; everything seems to indicate that society in general and academia, in particular, are especially interested in understanding why it has not been possible to democratize the right to higher education fully. Here these situations are presented as inequities and not as difficulties or obstacles, thus emphasizing that the disadvantages are produced by an unjust and unequal social system, and not the result of a lack of effort or personal initiative.

Once identified, these have been classified according to their level of preponderance and transversality within the overall number of studies reviewed (see **Figure 2**). In this regard, the absence of higher education offerings in rural areas is highly preponderant; the discontinuities between higher education and peasant socio-cultural capital, as well as the deficient academic preparation of rural youth in basic education, are very preponderant; the need to work to meet household needs in rural areas is preponderant; the ethical-rational discrimination affecting the rural population and the low-income level of rural households is somewhat preponderant; and

particular cases that require further exploration are the lack of a differentiated higher education policy, the low level of high school graduation by rural youth, the scarce dissemination in rural areas of scholarship programs for higher education, and the lack of vocational orientation for rural youth and families.

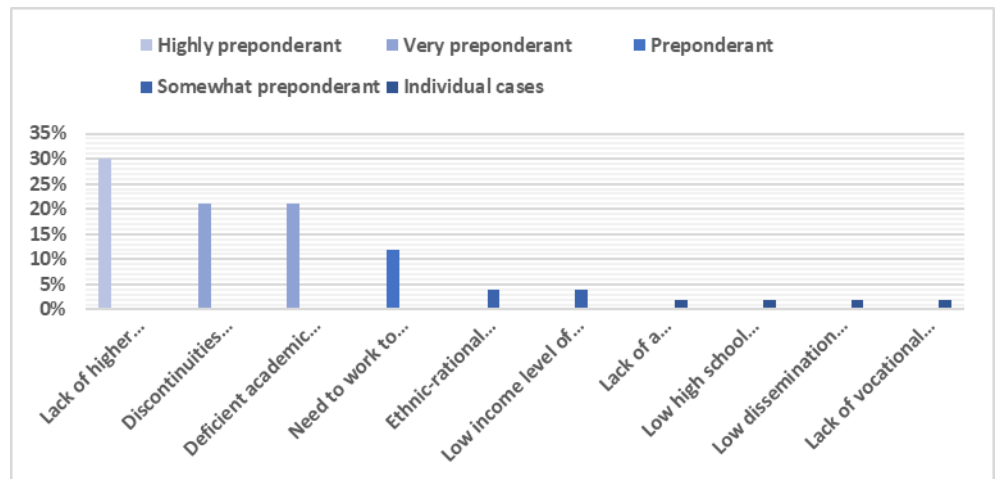


Figure 2. Inequities experienced by rural youth in accessing higher education (HE).

As for the highly preponderant inequity, that is, the lack of higher education offerings in rural areas, Castro (2012) expresses that the most attractive professional education institutions are in large cities, which represents an obstacle in educational access for rural youth. Constant (2020), Roman (2014) and Tovar et al. (2022) agree on the same point, for whom the academic offer is mostly urban and located in large metropolises, which implies resources and displacements that the rural population cannot afford. And with a territorial approach, Ospina (2019), Pardo (2017) and Satizábal et al. (2021) highlight that academic coverage in rural areas is decreasing as the educational level rises and the degree of rurality increases, with young people coming from dispersed rural areas having the least access to higher education, as the most critical case. It is not without a reason that authors such as Bogado et al. (2018), Martínez-Restrepo (2016) and Zago (2016) evidence in their studies the scarce offer of academic programs in and for the rural environment.

From a complementary point of view, Domínguez (2020) argues that there is a general deficit in the provision of public services for rural areas, which is why the population living in this sector does not have access to higher education centers located in their municipality. Along the same lines, Espinal et al. (2020) argue that in rural areas there is no academic offer in place and with relevant programs, which means that young people must leave their territory if they want to continue their higher education. Following the previous approaches, Gravilla et al. (2016) and Ospina (2019) problematize that, in addition to being meager, university careers moderately close to rural areas bear little relation to the demands of the labor market and are not aligned with the preferences of young people. It is for all of the above that Lozano (2019) hints at the need to think about the concepts of ‘rural higher education’ and ‘rural university’, which are just beginning to be considered in some countries.

Regarding the very preponderant inequalities, on the one hand, the discontinuities between higher education and peasant socio-cultural capital, Concha (2023),

Grompone (2018), Salata (2018) and Walker et al. (2022) argue that the social origin of rural youth and the parents' level of study are determinants in the aspiration enter higher education or not. This approach converges with Xie et al. (2010) and León and Sugimaru (2013) who find that parents' level of education is much lower in rural than in urban areas, which significantly affects young people's access to higher education. On his part, Goldman (2019) analyzes that for rural youth, the fact of not having people in their family who have attended a university makes the aspiration of entering higher education more distant and diffuse.

When emphasizing other aspects of rural socio-cultural capital that problematize the access of young people to higher education, Constant (2020) considers that under the self-image of inferiority that still survives in rural areas, many families continue to consider higher education as a privilege of a particular social class. On their part, Tovar et al. (2022) argue that the marks of origin continue to precipitate some young farmers to start a family and assume economic responsibilities at an early age. In a complementary sense, for Redin (2017) there are notable asymmetries between inherited cultural capital and the cultural and academic demands imposed by the higher education system, which ends up sowing in young people the idea that the continuity of higher education is not made for them.

Furthermore, concerning the deficient academic preparation of rural youth in basic education, authors such as Amankulova (2018), Chankseliani (2020), Concha (2013), Goldman (2019), Herrera and Rivera (2020), Leon and Sugimaru (2013), Lyngdoh and Myrthong (2021), Roman (2014) and Walker (2022) agree that the low academic level of rural schools (compared to urban schools), is a central aspect that prevents many young people from meeting the basic requirements for access to higher education institutions. Indeed, for Martínez-Restrepo (2016) and Prakhov and Bugakova (2023), the asymmetries between urban and rural youth are reflected in the results of standardized, national and international tests, which highlights that the rural schooled population does not acquire the academic competencies necessary for higher education access.

However, there are two views on a prevailing inequity, such as the need to work at an early age to meet household needs: for authors such as Grompone et al. (2018) and Herrera and Rivera (2020), many rural youth are forced to enter the workforce prematurely to contribute to family support, which prevents them from combining the time to study. On the other hand, Martínez-Restrepo et al. (2016), Pardo (2017) and Redin (2017) suggest that for many young people, especially young men, insertion into the world of work is a bet on independence and the attainment of resources, often aligned with the formation of their household, which constitutes a life project parallel to entering a professional education institution.

As for the somewhat preponderant inequities, that is, the ethical-rational discrimination affecting the rural population and the low-income level of rural households, Means (2018) recognizes that even within the rural youth segment there are various degrees of marginality: being black or Latino means even greater difficulties in pursuing higher education. Along the same lines, Pruitt and Flores (2021) argue that the low rates of entry to higher education by the rural population are mainly due to a logic of ethnic-racial and economic discrimination in which the white and high-income population secures the main political, social and academic privileges.

On the other hand, not being white or being white, but poor, leads to segregation. On their part, Concha (2013) and Zuoxu et al. (2010) maintain the idea that the low-income level of rural households continues to be an aspect that, in everyday life, discourages the pursuit of higher education.

Finally, there is a group of inequities that are described in isolation and about particular cases, which merit further exploration. In this sense, Yang (2010) argues that national governments do not recognize the differences between regions or the specific economic and academic needs of rural communities, making it necessary to reconsider a differentiated policy. On their part, García and Jacinto (2010) point out that the gaps in access to higher education are because only one-third of the rural school-age population is finishing high school. Meanwhile, Bogado et al. (2018) consider that the asymmetries in access to higher education are due to the limited spread of scholarship programs in rural areas, as well as the clientelism that has formed around the awarding of this benefit. In conjunction with the above, Gravilla et al. (2018) argue that career guidance processes for rural youth and families are almost nonexistent.

As can be seen, several inequities limit the right of rural youth to higher education. In some cases, they accumulate to form a hardened barrier, in others, they occur independently, although with profound implications. From the results, it is clear, on the one hand, that the low-income level of peasant households is not a substantial inequity in this order, which is largely due to the spread of scholarship programs and the progressive consolidation of the free higher education policy. On the other hand, that in many countries the deficient academic preparation of rural youth in basic education continues to be a major inequity, this shows that there is still a long way to go before higher education becomes a right and a social public good, which does not require academic merit or a selection process that reproduces inequality.

Finally, the absence of higher education offerings in rural areas is a highly preponderant and transversal inequity. It is imperative to understand that greater equity in access to higher education cannot be guaranteed without revising the structural bases on which the current model of higher education rests: mostly urban, academicist, with an offer aligned to market interests and elitist. In this sense, it is urgent to advance in the design of educational policies that make possible the consolidation of the concepts of 'rural higher education' and 'rural university'. It is not a matter of taking the 'university' to the rural areas, but of designing an agricultural and peasant university with a different logic; there are already advances in this direction, but the road has barely begun.

3.3. Actions to ensure greater equity in rural youth access to higher education

While the review shows that there is a set of inequities that undermine the access of rural youth to higher education, it also highlights actions that have been implemented in different countries to ensure greater equity in this regard. These actions can be classified into three main groups namely: those that aim to solve the lack of academic offerings in rural areas; those that defend the consolidation of higher education as a public and social good, and therefore free of charge; and those which

consider it necessary to implement more effective means of contact between institutions and communities (see **Figure 3**).

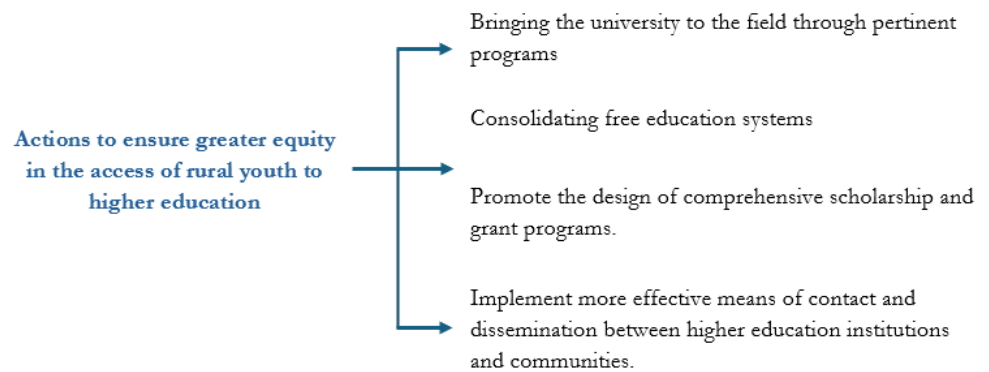


Figure 3. Actions to promote greater equity in the access of rural youth to higher education.

Regarding the first group of actions, Gómez (2020) suggests the need for public and private higher education institutions to build campuses close to rural areas, offering programs relevant to the professional potential of the sector, for example: agronomic engineering, the physical proximity as well as the formative utility of the program will increase the interest and entry of young people to higher education. In the same line of argument, Sánchez and Guerra (2021) argue that moving the university to rural areas significantly increases the continuity of higher education. However, it must be ensured that the academic offer is completely related to the labor prospects of the environment, otherwise, tensions and dilemmas may arise.

In a complementary sense, Nierotka et al. (2023) argue that encouraging the bidding of multicampus universities, some of whose campuses are located not in large cities, but in regions closer to the rural areas, can increase the access of rural youth to higher education. From Elliot's (2018) point of view, if the aim is to democratize the access of the rural population to higher education, it is necessary to implement a university model with a professional and territorial approach. On their part, Roman (2014) and Rutz et al. (2018) propose the need for the State in agreement with Higher Education Institutions to encourage the creation of higher education centers in the regions.

With attention to actions that defend the strengthening of higher education as a public and social good, Rivera (2019), for whom policies of free access to higher education, based on the principles of the right to education and equal opportunities, favor the democratization of higher education. Wasielewski (2015) converges on this. For him free higher education, a product of national and supranational investments, is the best way to include marginalized social groups, such as the rural population, in higher education.

Another group of actions is not limited to guaranteeing free admission or free places, since it is known that many other economic factors prevent rural youth from considering higher education as a public and social good. Thus, Román (2014) suggests the need to design comprehensive grant and scholarship systems that include, in addition to tuition costs, assistance for lodging, transportation, and food. Rodríguez (2020) agrees with this and believes that support should be complete and cover a

maintenance quota, thus avoiding the need to work and study that rural youth often experience. Gómez (2020) takes these proposals to another level by encouraging the creation of university campuses under the boarding school modality to offer rural youth an integral opportunity that responds to their various disadvantages and therefore includes free tuition, maintenance and solves the problem of displacement.

The third group of actions assumes that higher education is still a marginal issue for the rural population due to a lack of knowledge and lack of counseling. In this sense, Poretti (2019) suggests promoting university offerings by combining technology with traditional means, such as home visits. This increases the knowledge and interest of rural youth in higher education. Something similar is proposed by Holmbow (2020) for whom bringing the university idea closer to the field requires differentiated propagation measures such as professional visits and the creation of interest groups in the field. In the view of Gagnon and Cherasaro (2021), encouraging rural students enrolled in high school to take university courses and participate in immersion days helps young people to contemplate higher education more strongly.

As can be seen, the most documented action corresponds to the highly preponderant inequity noted in the previous section, that is, bringing the university to the field with relevant programs. The insistence that higher education institutions should build university campuses close to rural areas, offering programs related to the sector's potential, such as agricultural and environmental engineering, and programs related to veterinary medicine and animal husbandry, is significant in this regard. It is primarily the State's responsibility to promote the increase of higher education offerings in rural areas, either through public higher education institutions and/or in alliance with private institutions.

Undoubtedly, continuing to consolidate free education systems continues to be a necessary action in many countries to achieve full coverage in higher education. However, there are two important complements to this measure: firstly, to encourage free quota and quota reservation for certain social groups, since, in addition to economic disadvantages, there are sectors that accumulate other social disadvantages; secondly, to encourage scholarship systems and integral grants, since it is well known that even with tuition remission, many rural youth are left out of higher education because they do not have the resources to pay for housing, transportation and living expenses. Lastly, it is significant the absence of actions aimed at bridging the discontinuities between rural sociocultural capital and the capital established by the higher education system, which would undoubtedly imply a structural revision, of the social and political nature, of the current model.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The contradiction raised by Santos (2012) regarding the ethos of the university between the production of advanced scientific knowledge vs. the contribution to the construction of equity and social justice, seems to lean in the second direction. The marked interest that higher education has regained in the aspirations of young people and rural families, together with the actions that have been implemented in different countries to favor the access of the rural population to higher education, suggests that there is a majority interest for the system to be more inclined towards inclusion than

towards excellence. Nevertheless, the study also highlights the presence of a significant number of contributions that consider it a priority to improve the academic preparation offered to rural youth in basic education, thus showing that progress can be made in expanding coverage without this being detrimental to scientific and intellectual quality. Following the first line will surely lead, as described by Santos (2012), to a hierarchization between higher education institutions, some elite and others mass. The first ones, mostly private, will continue to be anchored to the Western paradigm of scientific excellence, high social prestige and elite training; the second one will focus on ensuring that more and more young people, including rural ones, can continue their higher education. This does not mean that the ‘mass institutions’ offer poor quality education, only that by opening their doors to all social classes they will have to reinterpret their formative stakes and, of course, negotiate their scope in terms of scientific and intellectual production.

However, if we take into account, as stated by Santos (2012), that a new conception of higher education should foster the encounter between scientific and non-scientific knowledge and, therefore, to understand that social democratization implies epistemic democratization first, it can be inferred then that from the approach of the ‘rural higher education’ and ‘rural university’ models, characterized mainly by the construction of campuses in rural areas and the offer of programs related to the potential of the environment, high academic standards can also be achieved. And they can be achieved not in the scientific and intellectual perspective of the West, but in a new conception of knowledge, typical of the global South.

On the other hand, the results presented here harmonize to a considerable extent with the postulates of CRES (2018) about conceiving higher education as a human and people’s right, therefore, as a public and social good, a duty of the State. There is an evident continuity between what CRES proposes and how rural youth and families have been understanding higher education, meaning, as a means of equalization and social ascent. Although this is important in a first approximation, the study also questions the correspondence of this position with the neoliberal logic of mobility and social ascent, accumulation of human capital and overcoming poverty, since it may be indirectly favoring uprooting and undermining community and territorial values. Therefore, progress should be made in initiatives that, while favoring the access of rural youth to higher education, contribute to the strengthening of territorial values, the rooting of the rural areas and local community development.

Likewise, CRES (2018) emphasizes that the challenge is not to incorporate historically excluded social groups into higher education, but to transform the structure of the system to make it more relevant to diversity. In this sense, and according to this study, it is concluded that actions aimed at democratizing access to higher education cannot be limited to guaranteeing free tuition, since there are many other inequities experienced by rural youth that are not solved by this measure. The major project consists of creating a differentiated model of higher education that, in terms of location, academic offerings, recognition of knowledge and articulation with the environment, allows rural youth to experience their professional education not as an inevitable process of acculturation, but as a pursuit of their sociocultural capital and their territorial aspirations.

Finally, the study shows that the democratization of rural youth’s access to higher

education has become a matter of international concern, and that while there are common concerns and challenges, there are also certain nuances between regions. In South America, the backdrop is the existence of an unequal education system, as well as the injustices and inequities experienced at the economic and social levels. In Europe, the issue has to do with the morphology of the higher education system which, as an academic and urban system, does not sufficiently penetrate rural areas. In North America, there is an important discussion about the ethical-rational discrimination suffered by the black, Hispanic, and rural population, due to which they are marginalized from many of their rights. To continue broadening the international perspective, it is necessary to continue the study by increasing the review of research in countries in the Middle East, East Asia and Africa.

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