

Countries and Regions

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Family Education and Access to Latin American Higher Education

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While 95 percent of each age group enrolls in grade one, less than 10 percent of the Latin American adult population has attained higher education. Nevertheless, only half of the applicants admitted into higher education are the first in their families to attend a university. The difference shows the impact of family education level in determining educational attainment. One out of every five students starting first grade will eventually be admitted into higher education.

Ultimately, about half of the population in each age group will attain only primary education, given their low reading comprehension levels (mainly those students from families with lower levels of education). On average, one-third of each age group will graduate from high school and one-fifth will reach the minimal reading and reasoning levels required for being admitted into higher education. The outcome is somewhat better in the six countries with the highest reading achievement levels in Latin America—where about half of each age group graduates from high school and one-third is admitted into higher education. In these countries educational attainment is also linked to family education.

The close linkage between educational attrition rates and family income or educational level is shown in household surveys now available in most Latin American countries. Household surveys show that students from wealthy families keep studying at the university during their 20s, while at that age youngsters from poorer families have already dropped out of school (most males in the poorest quintile have already joined the labor force).

Furthermore, high school graduates' access to their preferred (free or subsidized) public university and career depends on their score on a national entrance exam (that is influenced by family education). To succeed in the examination system—the *vestibular* in Brazil or aptitude entrance tests in Chile, Colombia, or Costa Rica—families “invest” in good private secondary schools and pay for their children to attend “cram high schools” (*preuniversitarios*, similar to the Japanese *jukus*), to prepare for entrance exams. Those who can pay for private education or coaching (solely for the purpose of passing the entrance exams) tend to secure entrance into specific universities and careers. In addition, the public primary and secondary school system is abandoned by the elites (even the bureaucrats managing the public education system are usually alumni of private schools and send their own children to private schools).

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The impact of family background increases at each stage of the selectivity process, and peaks for those accepted at subsidized universities. Research carried out on the Chilean admissions process in 1998–1999 sheds light on the role of family background, and the findings are likely to be replicated in other Latin American countries. Chile has a national entrance exam for admission to all publicly financed universities (monitored by a national university board). In December 1998, 107,663 of the high school graduates (about 44 percent of the 18-year-old population) signed up for taking the Academic Aptitude Test (PAA), and one-fourth (26,239) were eventually admitted in the 1999 university academic year (a similar number enrolled in nonsubsidized private higher education institutions). There were also 52,715 students from older age groups that took the PAA exam in December 1998 (most of them had taken a PAA exam before), of whom almost half (22,281) were admitted in the 1999 academic year. In both groups of candidates, family background was closely associated with admission.

The rapid expansion of higher education has not reduced the impact of family background. The gap between the percentage of Chilean males (15 years of age or older) with higher education (13.9 percent) and the corresponding percentage for parents of students that signed up for the entrance exam (33.6

percent) shows the rapid expansion and the critical impact of family education.

But this gap is also linked to low education levels of parents of students who are not completing primary or secondary education (parents with poor education are unable to help their children master basic skills). Most of the 40 percent of fourth grade students who cannot understand a 100-word passage (and eventually drop out or barely graduate from primary education) had parents with less than secondary education according to the socioeconomic analysis of the national test for that grade. Given the link between parents' education and economic income it can be concluded that few students from families with an income below the national average sit for the entrance examination for subsidized universities. Most of the 23,000 students who graduated from high school in 1998 but did not sign up for the entrance exam had less-educated parents.

The entrance examination shows an association between students' achievement (at the end of secondary education) and parents' education. One-third of the students (57,909) revealed a low ability to understand written questions and to carry out relatively straightforward reasoning (the test is focused on ability rather than knowledge). Parents of those students (scoring below the minimum required for admission to subsidized universities) have less education (only 17.1 percent had higher education) than parents of the average student that sit for the entrance exam (33.6 percent).

Family education is also linked to the ability to invest in preparing for an additional entrance exam.

Family education is also linked to the ability to invest in preparing for an additional entrance exam. The education of parents of older students who had taken the PAA exam previously (35.7 percent with higher education) was somewhat higher than the average parent of students who signed up for the entrance exam (33.6 percent). This difference is consistent with the education of parents of 26,664 students who scored over the minimum (required for admission to subsidized universities) but realized that their chance of being accepted in their preferred field or university was remote and thus did not apply for admittance in 1999. Their families were also more educated (39 of the parents had higher education) than the average parent of students who signed up for the entrance exam.

In summary, students mastering basic abilities are being promoted to upper educational levels and eventually admitted into higher education. At the same

time, education enrollments at all levels are increasing at a rapid pace. This rapid expansion is reflected in the finding that half of the students being admitted into universities are the first in their families to enroll at a university. However, further expansion of the higher education system will require an increase in achievement levels in primary education, both on grounds of quality and equality.

Note: The full version of this analysis of the Chilean admissions process (in Spanish) can be downloaded from the IIDE website www.iide.cl/publicaciones/libros.

Higher Education in Papua New Guinea: Striving for Quality

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Papua New Guinea, one of the world's least-developed countries, has set in motion a plan to try to improve the quality of its universities, but it will have to struggle against poverty and low capacity to achieve the necessary changes.

The higher education sector in Papua New Guinea (PNG) is mixed and disorganized in structure. Each of the six universities (four public, two private) was based on separate enabling legislation, with enrollments ranging from 400 to 3,000 full-time students. Most of the 26 institutions of higher education are single-discipline institutions (8 are teacher education institutions and 8 health education institutions). Higher education enrollments are estimated to number 6,345, representing about one percent of the 19-to-24-year age cohort. The numbers enrolled at the universities have increased by 22 percent since 1997.

Key Challenges

The lack of clear accreditation procedures means that most of these institutions, with only a few notable exceptions, are offering a narrow range of similar courses with quality that goes unchecked and probably varies from good to very poor. PNG's Commission for Higher Education has adopted a new framework for accredita-