



# 7

## Predictors of Vulnerability in Latin American Higher Education

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### Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right recognized by UNESCO (2009) and an established goal for the development of fair, democratic, and supportive societies. Higher education, as a recognized social public good and a duty of the state (UNESCO/IESALC 2008), must, as part of that right, guarantee social equality of access and achievement in the educational opportunities of all students throughout their academic careers (IESALC 2006).

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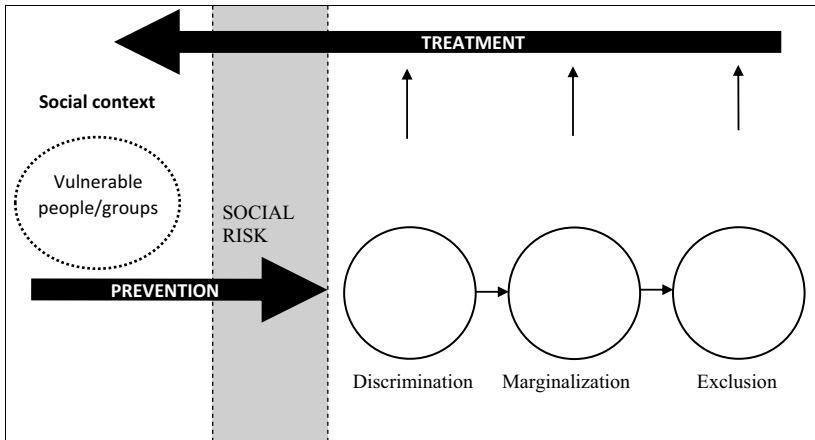
Despite the undoubted advances in coverage, Gairín and Suárez (2013) point out that significant gaps still exist linked to social, cultural, and geographical factors that act as determinants of the unequal and stratified nature of access to university education. Even in Europe, where university education is widely regarded as more developed, a level playing field in higher education has not been achieved, notwithstanding important differences between countries (EURYDICE 2013, p. 3). University education provides tools for professional and social advancement which can help personal and social progress in this regard. From this point of view, both inclusion and diversity constitute goals and challenges for higher education, its institutions, and actors.

This chapter presents the results of research carried out to examine the viewpoints of university governing boards on exclusion factors in Latin American higher education. This research was developed in parallel with the development of Project ACCEDES—“El acceso y el éxito académico de colectivos vulnerables en entornos de riesgo en Latinoamérica (ACCEDES)” (“Academic access and success for vulnerable groups in situations of risk in Latin America”)—cofounded by the European Union ALFA III Programme (<http://projectes.uab.cat/accedes/>), with the aim to promote strategies and initiatives to improve inclusion levels within Latin American universities.

## Education and Vulnerable Groups

Vulnerability, increasingly acknowledged in the rhetoric and practices of governments and universities, something previously considered by Gairín Sallán (2014), becomes the main priority on the educational agenda when the following is taken into account:

- A democratic society must be governed by the principles of equity, social inclusion, and justice, to guarantee that each and every student is treated fairly, especially those who are more disadvantaged (Ainscow et al. 2013).
- Guaranteeing the recognition of all members of a society as citizens and especially of those who are at risk of exclusion, has economic implica-



**Fig. 7.1** Prevention of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion

tions but also ensures access to basic competencies acquired in education at all levels, that promote personal, social, economic, and cultural development (Bolívar 2005).

The very idea of vulnerability brings to mind groups that are not necessarily “vulnerable” but “are in a vulnerable situation” (Gairín and Suárez 2013; Jurado de los Santos 2013). Therefore, we are talking about a situation with social and cultural roots, which can be reversed if we apply the appropriate means and which may be recognized, accepted, and valued by those involved, and on equal terms with, other people (Fig. 7.1).

The concept of poverty arose from the context of social and economic change that took place in pre-industrial society and is related to the first theories about inequality as an element of human insecurity linked to individualist and criminalist approaches. Subsequently, more social approaches incorporated a more collective vision which took into account socioeconomic conditions. Thus, the concept of exclusion evolved from a limited vision of marginalization, functionalist in nature, to a broader more contextualized and complex view, opening the door to understanding processes of social, cultural, and legal inequality that occur in modern societies.

It is important at this point to go back to the fundamental issues and to remember that the construction of societies is based on putting collective needs before those of the individual. It is about working with others and trusting others to achieve common goals. However, social trust (trust in others) is breaking down and social cohesion appears as a deceptive new construct. As Sandoval states:

The notion of social cohesion could be considered a trap of neoliberalism that considers societal life as simply a market like any other and that economic efficiency is the only relevant criterion for judgement. From this perspective, social cohesion arises in individualistic societies that do not impose positions or roles, but rather place challenges on individuals, challenges that they must overcome by mobilizing themselves, in order to achieve autonomy, in order to be subjects. (2016, p. 140)

The concept of “vulnerability” can thus be considered a complex and multidimensional notion, which can affect individuals, groups, and communities with varying intensity and more or less permanently in those aspects that shape their well-being and full development (Olmos Rueda 2011). To act on this issue requires understanding it in relation to other concepts, such as poverty and social exclusion, and at the same time, analyzing its effects in specific situations, such as, in this case, its implications in the field of higher education.

## Inclusive Universities and Addressing Vulnerability

Universities are increasingly addressing vulnerability, if we consider the proliferation of projects, programs, and good practices that are constantly being disseminated as evidence of this. There is not only a concern over this issue but also concrete initiatives and a commitment to the effective inclusion of those students who are in a vulnerable position.

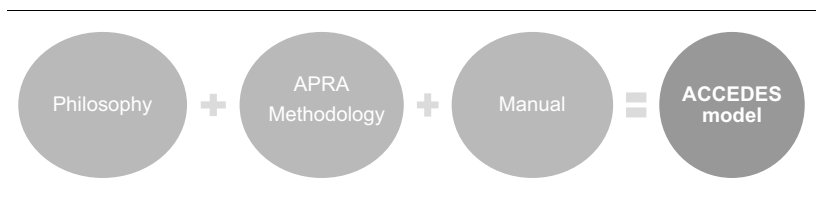
Equity in terms of inclusion is understood as a “*critical requirement*” (Díaz-Romero 2010, p. 4) to ensure quality in universities: universities cannot be considered of high-quality if they are not inclusive, and vice

versa. However, addressing vulnerability continues to be a challenge since it requires, among other things, actions to (Gairín Sallán 2014):

- further analyze the achievement of the social aspect of higher education (Red Eurydice 2011), by increasing the participation of vulnerable groups that reflect the distribution of social groups in society at large; and
- push for a greater focus on diversity and in the achievement of inclusion as a task of the institution itself, of its structures, dynamics, and employees and not only in terms of actions or programs for students (Díaz-Romero 2010).

In summary, addressing inclusion in universities, that is, building inclusive universities, can be seen as a democratic proposal but also as an opportunity for innovation and developing new competencies for the institutions themselves (Sebastián and Scharager 2007), as long as the expectations, determination, and actions of all the institutional actors involved are coordinated.

Despite some problems and limitations that may affect their implementation, the challenges are clear (Gairín Sallán 2014): (1) discriminatory views and practices that still exist; (2) difficulties in transitioning from secondary school level to higher education level; (3) difficulties in achieving academic leveling of students in vulnerable situations; (4) difficulties of financing in order to sustain exciting affirmative actions and to implement or initiate new ones; and (5) going beyond the view of inclusion as simply an issue about access and reinforcing actions that cover all educational stages, above all retention and egress/transition to the job market. We can also talk about other limitations, such as the situation of “invisibility” that often affects students, the need to overcome physical barriers, or the importance of improving and strengthening information and dissemination channels between universities and potential students.



**Fig. 7.2** Basic outline of the ACCEDES model (APRA—Spanish acronym for Access, Permanency and Academic Achievement)

## The ACCEDES Project Experience

This research has been conducted as part of the project entitled “El acceso y el éxito académico de colectivos vulnerables en entornos de riesgo en Latinoamérica (ACCEDES)” (“Academic access and success for vulnerable groups in situations of risk in Latin America”), cofounded by the European Union ALFA III Programme (<http://projectes.uab.cat/accedes/>)—its aim to improve the inclusion levels within Latin American universities.

The ACCEDES model is based on three elements: (1) a philosophy, which includes a set of guiding principles, values, and objectives for intervention processes with vulnerable groups; (2) a methodology, formulated using a tool that enables the diagnosis, identification, and prioritization of vulnerable groups, as well as an action protocol for implementing changes in higher education institutions; and (3) a manual, structured from guidelines, that identifies each of the vulnerable groups and specifies 32 orientation strategies and 24 organizational development strategies that respond to the specific needs of each group (Fig. 7.2).

The implementation of the ACCEDES model follows six phases, organized chronologically, that allow universities to operationalize strategic planning to design, apply, and evaluate plans that enable vulnerable groups to access, progress through, and egress from university.

### *Preliminary phase, or creation of conditions*

This phase enables a preliminary diagnosis of the contextual situation and of the institution, identifying general and specific constraints, and enabling decision-making regarding the maximum optimization of resources.

*Planning phase, or design of intervention*

This phase is about defining the basic actions that will introduce improvements for vulnerable groups to access, progress through, and egress from university. To this end, general and specific objectives are set and the required actions, and their evaluation mechanisms, designed.

*Implementation phase, or carrying out actions*

This encompasses the planned follow-up, monitoring, and/or control actions. Additionally, it includes foreseeing possible obstacles and the intervention alternatives to help overcome them, while always taking into account the resistance detected and the internal dynamics of the organization.

*Evaluation phase, or verification of results*

Evaluation takes into account the different agents (promoters and executors) involved in the execution of the plan, as well as the recipients of its services, with the aim of collecting information and data essential for decision-making.

*Institutionalization phase, or incorporation of changes*

This phase contemplates actions that enable the institutionalization of those strategies deemed successful during the execution of the intervention plan, or their incorporation into the culture and dynamics of the institution. It must ensure the sustainability and political, economic, and environmental feasibility of the implemented changes.

*Dissemination phase, or sharing of results*

Linked to the previous phase, this covers the dissemination of the results internally (as a way to facilitate decision-making and obtain support for the sustainability of the project) and externally (to establish links with other institutions that share similar objectives, establishing synergies and developing joint projects).

## **Instruments and Strategies for Intervention**

The changes asked of higher education institutions, and upon which actions can be taken, share the common goal of developing well-trained professionals committed to the society in which they live. A review of pro-

grams for change within the world of education, for different formative stages, brings to light several aspects that might facilitate these changes, as indicated below:

- The need to combine internal and external actions.
- The existence of a minimum set of conditions: staff stability, minimum set of resources, planning, leadership, adequate staff training, curricular flexibility, among others.
- The importance of positive personal experiences for those involved in the face of change.
- The importance of intervention strategies and not just structural planning.
- The relevance of projects whose focus is the classroom/workshop or laboratory.
- The evolution of institutions as organizations that learn.
- The orientation of education toward processes of collaboration and investigation.

The current situation conforms to these previous approaches (the need to act on the institution and have collaborative work structures in place) but it also allows us to glimpse the importance of the work strategies that are at the heart of all the actions of educational institutions. It is time to look at global strategies for change in educational institutions (organizational development, institution-based development, collaborative development, inter-center networks, etc.) and to consider specific strategies for collaboration between the different agents involved.

Within the framework of the ACCEDES project, strategies were designed and adapted to facilitate the development and implementation of improvement plans (see Gairín Sallán 2014). These were specified in 28 *orientation and tutoring strategies*, related to the 8 priority groups: those with a very low HDI, the disabled, indigenous people, women, students from rural areas, non-conventional students, ethnic-cultural minorities, and immigrants. The project also drew up 24 *organizational strategies* for the planning, development, and monitoring of intervention plans which each university can choose from and use as a catalyst for creating conditions that promote institutional change and the inclusion of vulnerable



groups. The following is described for each of these: what they consist of, what their general characteristics and forms of use are, some examples of application, and some references for further examination; also indicated is the most appropriate moment for application and an estimate of the cost (low, medium, or high) this implies.

Apart from specific considerations about strategy, the following should be considered (based on the analysis described in Gairín [2003, pp. 42–63]):

- The use made of strategies as intervention procedures or action guidelines, compared with other notions of these strategies as plans or guides for addressing a situation, model, or pattern of behavior, as a position adopted against the reality of the situation or as a way of approaching it.

In this regard, they:

- Indicate the path for practical action and are directly related to the intervention method and to the systematization proposals that accompany them.
- Relate to the promotion and development of participatory and collaborative management models.
- Address production as well as attention to the people involved, which makes them protagonists of the change that is intended.
- Seek a process of reflection, which based on an analysis of the current situation can help to develop new intervention proposals.

In any case, the use of strategies has an instrumental aim regarding institutional objectives and goals. Although this use may be decisive for an improvement to be successful, it should never become an end in its own right. This can happen when goals are not clear, or an instrumental approach is considered the only feasible way to resolve shortcomings or problems. Sometimes we forget that organizations are mere social constructs that are made up of components which change over time and help to shape an identity that which eclipses them.

## Method

Qualitative methods were utilized in this study to examine the viewpoints of university governing boards on exclusion factors in Latin American higher education. This methodological approach allowed researchers to focus on understanding the social meanings that people develop with respect to context, objects, and other people (Wengraf 2001).

The study's fieldwork was conducted in 2013 and two data collection methods were utilized: in-depth interviews and focus groups. Both methods enabled in-depth exploration of perspectives, experiences, and opinions expressed by university governing boards, access to context, and an understanding of the specific meaning for the participants of the topic analyzed: *exclusion factors in Latin American higher education*. Governing boards are those groups that have the duties and responsibilities associated with "defining a strategic vision for the institution, setting institutional policies, monitoring institutional performance, and ensuring good stewardship of the institution's assets [and taking] responsibilities for quality assurance and the equivalence of academic awards" (Saint 2009, p. 8).

In-depth interviews and focus groups were carried out based on the same semi-structured interview protocol, focusing on: higher education policies, the characteristics and typology of vulnerable groups, specific programs targeting these groups, the factors generating disadvantage, forms of exclusion from university, and how exclusion becomes apparent in the progression of certain groups through university.

Nineteen institutional representatives of Latin American universities were interviewed, selected from among the 24 institutions involved in the ACCEDES project. The criteria for selecting participants were: (1) over 4 years' experience in university management positions; (2) over 5 years' experience working in their current university; and (3) responsibilities relating to student access and retention policies. Participants belonged to both private and public universities, with sizes ranging from 4000 to 200,000 students (Table 7.1). Each interview lasted approximately 50 min. Being able to access participants from 19 Latin American institutions made it possible to build arguments that respond to the complexity of different realities, develop a deep and wide-ranging conceptual debate, facilitate linguistic clarity, and bring together different axiological viewpoints.

**Table 7.1** Participant profile

	Number
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	10
Male	9
<i>Age</i>	
45 or under	3
Between 46 and 55	7
Over 55	9
<i>Years of experience</i>	
Between 4 and 5	4
Between 6 and 7	5
8 or more	10
<i>Public and private HEIs</i>	
Public	12
Private	7
<i>HEI size</i>	
10,000 students or fewer	4
Between 10,001 and 50,000 students	12
Over 50,000 students	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>

In addition, the 19 university governing board members interviewed were grouped into 3 focus groups, comprising between 4 and 7 participants each. Considering that exclusion factors are affected by contextual and geographical characteristics (Wang 2011; Geruluk and Race 2007), participants were grouped according to the three geographical regions of Latin America.

- The first focus group was held in Cuba and included representatives of North America and the Caribbean islands (i.e., Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Mexico, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba).
- The second focus group was held in Venezuela and included representatives of the South American Andean region (i.e., Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, and Venezuela).
- The last focus group was held in Paraguay and included South American southern countries (i.e., Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Paraguay).

The focus groups allowed us to gather a general information framework about the subject of the study, stimulated a more in-depth reflection, and allowed us to research complex phenomena and compare divergent views (Krueger and Casey 2008; Litosseliti 2003). The fact that all the participants were familiar with the ACCEDES project facilitated their participation and data collection and increased the likelihood of obtaining more authentic answers (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006).

To meet the objectives of this study, the interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using MAXQDA, in order to identify recurrent patterns and themes. Data analysis was carried out by integrating inductive and deductive approaches, which allowed us to establish a constant dialogue between the data and current theories (McMillan and Schumacher 2010). Using thematic analysis strategies, we identified emerging cross-cutting themes from the interviews and focus groups and developed a preliminary category system that was completed by incorporating analysis categories sourced from the literature review.

Although, as we have mentioned, exclusion can manifest itself in different ways depending on context (Wang 2011; Geruluk and Race 2007), the complexity of the phenomenon makes it advisable to conduct a preliminary comprehensive approximation. Therefore, the analysis carried out is cross-sectional and not comparative, focusing on those common aspects identified by the Latin American university governing boards.

## Results

In this research, the governing boards of Latin American universities provided descriptive and discerning responses about their experiences. An analysis of the transcribed interviews and focus groups revealed five salient emergent themes: (1) personal characteristics, (2) family situation, (3) institutional features, (4) public policies, and (5) phases of academic career.

### *1. Personal characteristics*

In the study of exclusion factors of university students, participants identified personal characteristics as one of the most important factors. In

addition, they claimed that it has been one of the most studied factors over the years. A student's school record and academic performance are variables that can generate exclusion among young people: when there is poor performance, particularly at non-mandatory education levels, the chances of participating in third-level studies are reduced:

The students' background and performance throughout their academic history is a clear indicator of the likelihood of their success. If they were able to complete primary and secondary school, why would they not succeed at university? (Dean, Paraguay)

Regarding this same educational record, orientation toward a career is a key element. Career orientation is characterized by having clear academic interests, demonstrating motivation for certain studies, making decisions using a single criterion or receiving professional guidance during times of transition. In this sense, one vice-chancellor maintains that:

In my view, there is a very important element in these cases, and that is for the student to have clear goals and objectives. If students really want to become professionals and they have a vocation, they will overcome the difficulties or will seek help from whoever they can to achieve their dream. As vice-chancellor, I have seen extraordinary examples of people's will to succeed in achieving the objectives they set out for themselves. (Mexico)

If we analyze personal characteristics, it becomes evident that self-perception or self-attribution of personal characteristics becomes a key element. Thus:

One of the factors affecting students in an at-risk situation is their own self-perception – their confidence in their ability to succeed, their self-efficiency, their self-control and their ability to fulfil academic requirements. If they are predisposed to succeed they are very likely to do so. (Lecturer, Nicaragua)

Young people from disadvantaged environments who must work while they are studying present a higher risk of exclusion. Especially if the working conditions are very tough or the jobs are unskilled. In this regard, one dean states:

I have seen brilliant students fail because they have to go to work in places with conditions that make it impossible to balance study and work. And also earning very little money. In the end this discourages students and leads them to drop out. (Peru)

In summary, exclusion factors linked to personal characteristics include low academic performance in secondary school education, low self-esteem or low self-control, having received deficient academic training in secondary school, having to work in precarious conditions, and not having an explicitly defined professional or academic career plan.

## *2. Family situation*

The family situation refers to how a student's relational and affective environment can become a key factor in their vulnerability. In fact, the close connection between academic and social integration is influenced, on the one hand, by the student baggage when entering university and, on the other hand, by their family environment:

When you have to work to support your family or you have to seek resources to feed your children, studying at university becomes your second priority, even if you are highly motivated. Here in Bolivia it is a very common story, especially among young women who get pregnant and have to care for their babies. (Department director, Bolivia)

A family's ability to invest financial resources is another exclusion factor, so poverty and access to education are still correlative factors in many Latin American countries. A delegate from the rectorship in Costa Rica states that:

There is a fact that has become evident in the last few years: poverty and lack of education are variables with a positive correlation, and this is associated with a lack of opportunities.

Family support is a determining factor in young people's academic success. This support may be financial, as argued by the president of a university in Panama:

It is undeniable that coming from a family with scarce resources in which parents have not had the opportunity to get an education makes it harder for their children to access university. Low income family status can have a negative effect in the absence of external support for education.

When young people receive sufficient and sustained support and extrinsic motivation in their homes this can also provide emotional support. One dean commented in this regard:

In some cases, when young people arrive home they may not find an environment that is favourable to study. Being the first university student in a family unit is very complicated; you have to break through many barriers.

Place of residence may also become a factor of exclusion, although this depends on the availability of transport links. Young people living in the urban periphery or in rural areas with deficient means of transport may not access university studies or may withdraw prematurely:

When I talk about place of residence I am not only referring to the geographical location but also the disadvantages present in this place: distance, the time required for commuting, the costs involved in commuting and, mainly, the difficulty in accessing means of transport. (Dean, Paraguay)

In summary, exclusion factors linked to the family situation include a household's precarious employment context, low educational attainment by parents and siblings, young students with family responsibilities (particularly if they are caring for children), fragmented family units, a family environment with difficulties accessing culture, and living in remote areas or areas that are badly connected with university centers.

### *3. Institutional features*

The organizational dimension takes into account the characteristics of higher education institutions in relation to students at risk of exclusion. Therefore, the involvement and interest of teaching staff in minimizing exclusion factors for students becomes a very significant factor. Those education professionals most involved in designing strategies that address diversity help overcome exclusion factors:

At the end of the day there is a very important issue, and that is what the lecturer does within the classroom. Whether the lecturer is sensitive towards minorities – whether the lecturer has the capacity and is interested in designing different strategies to help students. There is the issue of teaching staff training, but it still depends on the attitude of each lecturer. (Vice-chancellor, Chile)

Beyond the lecturer's individual dimension, it is important to know whether, as part of the university's general policy, guidelines exist for dealing with the exclusion of vulnerable students. In this regard, interviewees emphasized the importance of having specific action plans, providing resources for minority groups, promoting programs with financial support, the possibility of getting support and constant guidance from experts, etc. Each university's strategic plan should include initiatives and actions to minimize exclusion factors. In this regard, one course director states:

In this university there is a political commitment from the office of the chancellor to include ethnic and cultural minorities. Programmes are developed, we respond to requests and we invest resources in helping the most vulnerable students. (Venezuela)

The different strategies implemented by higher education institutions to prevent the exclusion of vulnerable students must be specific and must have the capacity to respond to the specific characteristics of each group facing the challenges of higher education:

Universities wishing to address the issue of diversity must establish all kinds of programmes, ranging from removing architectural barriers for students with reduced mobility to including blended distance learning for students from rural areas far away from the capital. (Dean, Colombia)

Another exclusion factor that affects university institutions is the management of transition processes. On the one hand, the transition from secondary education to university, and on the other, the transition from one academic year to the next within the university. A vice-chancellor from the Dominican Republic comments:



Certain critical moments can be identified in university life which require special attention, these include exam periods, academic year progression, access to education, etc.; specific actions should be provided for all these academic transitions. Especially for students with more difficulties.

In summary, exclusion factors linked to institutional features include the lack of motivation or low levels of interest of academic staff, neglect during the transition between different academic stages, especially access to university, insufficient provision of financial resources, poor access to facilities, etc.

#### *4. Public policies*

The dimension of higher education public policies and the range of actions for their implementation are of key importance for the most vulnerable groups. Public policies, if they are decidedly aimed at tackling the permanent marginalization and exclusion of the most vulnerable groups, may contribute to providing real opportunities for these groups to succeed in higher education institutions. Widespread public policies are current phenomena in different Latin American countries. For example, a person in charge of the university access program in Cuba argues that:

In Cuba, we are now analysing the initiative approved in Brazil – a recent law that promotes the inclusion of African descent minorities in university. Today, nearly all higher education institutions are designing policies to protect the interests of certain traditionally marginalized minorities in Latin America.

On the other hand, the government's legal initiative must protect the university's independence given the different realities existing within a single country. If national policy is applied uniformly throughout all universities, it might restrict the way they respond to the specificity of their environment. This is how the legal initiative becomes bureaucracy. A vice-chancellor expresses it like this:

Universities must have sufficient resources to provide services to vulnerable groups. Not all universities should act in the same way. It depends on the region and on the groups that they encounter. It should be possible to pro-

pose different things. I imagine that they have different needs in the country's capital to those we have here, in more remote areas. (Vice-chancellor, Dominican Republic)

Supporting this argument, one person stated:

Each university is different, so it is fundamental for universities to be able to establish our own policies regarding vulnerable groups. We should have full capacity to make decisions about actions plans, budgets and priorities. On this matter, we cannot follow government dictates. (Delegate of the rector's office, Costa Rica)

In conclusion, the goal of public policies must be to compensate for young people's situations of vulnerability or exclusion:

I don't believe we have to facilitate the access of young people with the greatest problems; what government policies should ensure is that the difficulties faced by the most vulnerable groups are not a barrier for them to reach and succeed at university. (Dean, Colombia)

In summary, exclusion factors linked to public policies include ignoring as priority groups those at the greatest risk of exclusion, a lack of explicitly defined remedial actions, not establishing a quota or number of preferential entry university places for groups at risk of exclusion, not recognizing university independence, and low levels of investment in public higher education.

### *5. Phases of academic career*

Finally, analysis of the data from the interviews and focus groups shows that exclusion factors are different for each of the stages of a student's academic career:

I think we should differentiate three points in the academic lives of students. Their entry to university, their academic development and, finally, their entry into the workplace and the professional world. (Access program director, Cuba)

The impact of each of the four dimensions identified (personal characteristics, family situation, institutional features, and public policies) depends on the point at which students find themselves in their academic lives. This time-related dimension requires rethinking the exclusion factors described above, since their expression can be different at each stage. Therefore, the interviewees emphasize the identification of three main phases. The first phase, linked to access to higher education, socialization in university life, and relationships with teaching staff and classmates:

The students who come to study from the high Andean plateau region, which are the most remote and badly connected areas from the city, are at a loss the first few months and find it hard to adapt to university life. In general, not only must they adapt to university life, but they must also adapt to living away from home, far from their families, with few resources and no friends. I think starting university is very difficult for these young students. (Departmental director, Bolivia)

The second phase that occurs during academic development and while studying at university is considered here:

We subject our students to demanding tests that are very difficult to pass. That is why students who have some kind of problem end up withdrawing after two or three initial semesters. Considering that each degree programme presents its own challenges, imagine if there are also financial or linguistic problems or if one is living disconnected from one's environment. Academic life is full of complexities that can cause a student to drop out. (Vice-chancellor, Mexico)

Finally, there is the third phase, relating to academic egress and transition to the job market:

Career guidance has not been developed much here. I know that in Europe it is done, but here we do not have that tradition. Once students receive their university degree certificate they leave and we don't hear from them again. We do not help them with career guidance nor do we have resources to help them transition to adult life. I think this is one of the main challenges we face as a country and as a university. (Course director, Venezuela)

## Conclusions and Discussion

The role of universities has changed in the last few decades and, increasingly, it has become a space for training highly qualified professionals that our dynamic society demands and an opportunity to develop people with the capacity and motivation for higher education. This process, far from being restricted to certain elites, has increasingly become a space for society and for education.

This opening up of universities to society makes these institutions party to the challenges of society and demands that they pay more attention to vulnerable groups. This is especially true if we consider that vulnerability is a structural phenomenon, the product of a series of events linked to the structural inequalities of an economic, social, political, and cultural system in a specific context, but also a product of society resulting from the convergence of unfavorable interrelated factors that negatively impact on different “vital areas.” We should not forget that the notion of vulnerability is associated, at times, with social exclusion and this is defined in a negative sense, as something which is lacking, and is related to a perception of society in which some people are “inside” (included) and others “outside” of the system.

The processes of accumulation, combination, and feedback of exclusion factors allow us to think, as Subirats (2004) puts it, about a relative flexibility and permeability of borders between inclusion, exclusion, and social vulnerability. Understood in this way, it is a reversible and modifiable condition, taking into account the framework of fundamental rights and guarantees that cover all subjects.

We have studied the perceptions of governing boards regarding exclusion factors for young people from vulnerable groups at university. Adding to other studies on inequality, inclusion, and equity in higher education in Latin America (e.g., Gazzola and Didriksson 2008), we have identified five factors that explain exclusion in higher education: (1) personal characteristics, (2) family situation, (3) institutional features, (4) public policies, and (5) the developmental phases of students. The results allowed classification of exclusion factors for vulnerable groups at university as intrinsic (i.e., personal characteristics and family situation) and/or extrinsic (i.e., institutional features and public policies). These dimensions have differ-

ent manifestations throughout the different phases of a university student's academic life (i.e., access, academic development, egress, and transition).

The intrinsic dimension includes exclusion factors linked to personal characteristics, such as low academic performance in secondary school education, low self-esteem or low self-control, having received deficient academic training in secondary school, having to work in precarious conditions, and not having an explicitly defined professional or academic career plan. Our results concur with Castro et al. (2017) and Martin et al. (2014), who contend that student engagement depends on “the development of a positive student identity which influences students' motivation to engage” (2014, p. 200).

The second element with an intrinsic dimension is *family situation*, which includes a household's precarious employment context, low educational attainment by parents and siblings, young students with family responsibilities (particularly if they are caring for children), family fragmentation, a family environment with difficulties accessing culture, and living in remote areas or areas that are badly connected to university centers. Other studies carried out in Latin America, specifically in Cuba, argue that family influences a university students' performance and that in the case of vulnerable young people, the relationship between family and educational institutions should be strengthened. The extrinsic elements that explain exclusion from HEIs include the factors we have called *institutional features* and *public policies*. The institutional features factor considers aspects connected with: (1) the lack of motivation or low levels of interest of academic staff, (2) the absence of programs to focus and facilitate transition between different academic stages, especially access to university, (3) insufficient provision of financial resources, (4) poor accessibility to facilities, and (5) location of institutions. These results are consistent with previous studies focusing on organizational elements that determine inclusion in higher education and, in particular, with those studies that highlight the key role of the teaching staff (Gibbons and Vignoles 2012).

In addition, the public policies factor comprises elements associated with the lack of explicitly defined remedial actions, not establishing a quota or number of preferential entry university places for groups at risk of exclusion, ignoring priority groups, not recognizing university independence, and low levels of investment in public higher education. Evidently,

these public policies respond to ideologies and underlying principles that inevitably shape the types of actions to be taken (Kilpatrick and Johns 2014; King et al. 2011). So, for example, Gidley et al. (2010) identify three types of ideology that explain higher education social inclusion theories and policies: (1) neo-liberal ideology, linked to those actions seeking to improve access; (2) social justice theory, which seeks to promote student participation and integration; and (3) human potential ideology, which focuses on success through empowerment.

Some of the challenges for achieving a more inclusive higher education may be in line with those raised by Ainscow et al. (2013, p. 54) and Gairín Sallán (2014; Gairín and Suárez 2015) and are summarized as follows:

1. Gathering accurate information about groups in vulnerable situations and their educational situations, with the need to make progress in the criteria used to clarify and identify vulnerable groups (Gairín and Suárez 2014).
2. Collaboration between institutions as a way of creating a perspective of the system as a whole.
3. The need for local leadership, that is, a reference in the area/region that can coordinate this inter-institutional collaboration based on the principle of equity and in relation to other social and cultural policies.
4. The need to link institutional actions to community initiatives, particularly those that affect young people
5. The requirement to implement those policies at a national level that take into account and favor actions regarding inclusion and equity that are being developed at the local/regional level. In particular, strategies aimed at overcoming the digital divide are important.
6. Establishing cross-sectional commitments that combine equity with efforts to develop a more just society.

We already have the elements needed to promote an increasingly inclusive university. The emphasis is now on the sustained application of these proposals, on follow-up and learning from the errors detected, on the evaluated impact of these proposals, and on expanding them and promoting their implementation.

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