

EPILOGUE

JEFFERSON EDUARDO CABRERA-AMAIQUEMA
ITB -Ecuador
JLA Ediciones
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4623-4462>

ECONOMICS OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

The analysis developed in *Education, Equity and Development: Economics of Education and Social Mobility* allows us to conclude that education is a fundamental condition for economic, social and human development, but it does not produce these results automatically. Its transformative capacity depends on the quality of learning, the equitable distribution of resources, the strength of institutions, the conditions of the labor market, and the existence of public policies capable of articulating training with social and productive needs. Expanding schooling is essential, but it is insufficient when access does not translate into permanence, learning, qualifications, decent employment and social mobility.

The first conclusion of the work is that the linear interpretation according to which a greater number of years of study necessarily leads to higher levels of productivity, income and well-being must be overcome. Education can strengthen human capital, expand individual freedoms and foster innovation; however, its impact is weakened when production systems do not generate enough jobs, educational institutions offer training of unequal quality or credentials expand without a clear correspondence with the skills acquired. Development therefore depends not only on the amount of education accumulated, but on the way in which it is integrated into a broader institutional, economic and social framework.

One of the main findings is the consolidation of educational inflation as a structural problem of contemporary higher education systems, particularly visible in developing countries. The increase in institutions, programs, enrollments, and degrees has expanded formal access opportunities, but it has also reduced the differential value of certain credentials. When the

supply of graduates grows faster than skilled jobs, academic degrees cease to represent a competitive advantage and become minimum requirements for entering or remaining in the labor market.

This process generates a credential escalation. People are driven to pursue additional degrees, certifications, and graduate degrees not always to substantially expand their knowledge or productivity, but to maintain their relative standing vis-à-vis other candidates. Consequently, the value of training begins to shift from learning to the accumulation of formal signals. Education is therefore at risk of becoming a mechanism of selection and filtering, rather than a process of effective capacity development.

The evidence examined for Mexico shows that the expansion of higher education cannot be explained exclusively by the growth in enrollment or by the direct needs of the productive system. The increase in the number of institutions is related to economic and human development variables, but these relationships are not sufficient to demonstrate that institutional expansion responds in a balanced way to educational or labor demand. This behavior is consistent with a dynamic of overexpansion, institutional competition, and credentialing, in which the growth of the educational offer can advance faster than the capacity of the economy to absorb its graduates.

Educational inflation does not mean that education has lost its importance. On the contrary, it shows the need to recover its substantive value. The problem is not that more people are studying, but that the expansion of coverage can take place without adequate quality controls, without curricular relevance and without an economic policy capable of taking advantage of the skills developed. The answer should not be to restrict access, but to ensure that educational expansion is accompanied by verifiable learning, comprehensive training, research, innovation and job opportunities consistent with the skills acquired.

The second major conclusion relates to the persistence of educational inequalities. Formal access to education does not eliminate differences associated with income, gender, ethnicity, territory, disability, migratory status, or the cultural capital of families. These inequalities are manifested in the quality of the institutions accessed, the availability of resources, the

possibilities of permanence, learning outcomes, the transition between levels and the subsequent recognition of credentials in the labour market.

Educational inequality is not an isolated or accidental phenomenon. It is the result of historical, economic, cultural and institutional processes that unevenly distribute opportunities. Students do not enter the system from the same starting point: they differ in their conditions of food, health, connectivity, housing, family accompaniment, access to information, language proficiency and support networks. Treating populations facing profoundly different conditions identically can preserve inequalities rather than correct them.

In this sense, equity must become a structuring principle of educational policy. It is not limited to expanding quotas or formally eliminating barriers to entry, but also requires creating effective conditions so that people can stay, learn, graduate and turn their training into real opportunities. This requires progressive financing models, priority investment in vulnerable populations and territories, academic accompaniment, attention to diversity, intercultural education, adequate infrastructure and evaluation systems that allow the identification of both progress and persistent gaps.

Affirmative action is a legitimate and necessary instrument for addressing historical inequalities. Quotas, differentiated admission systems, targeted scholarships, and accompaniment programs can improve the representation and performance of excluded groups. However, their effectiveness depends on their not functioning as isolated interventions. Opening a door of access to an institution that continues to reproduce economic, cultural or academic barriers does not guarantee substantive inclusion. Affirmative action must be articulated with institutional reforms, retention policies, participation of target groups, and rigorous evaluations of their results.

Nor can social mobility be attributed solely to individual effort. Educational trajectories are built through a chain of conditions that begins in early childhood, continues in basic and higher education, and is projected towards labor insertion and social recognition. When one of these links is weakened, educational investment loses its capacity to produce mobility. Education can raise aspirations and broaden skills, but it cannot alone compensate for precarious employment, discrimination or the absence of productive opportunities.

The third conclusion concerns the financing of higher education and the role of scholarships. These mechanisms are essential to reduce the economic barriers that limit access, permanence and academic mobility. In contexts characterized by rising enrollments, expanding private provision, and insufficient family income, scholarships can prevent ability to pay from determining who enters higher education and who is excluded.

However, the existence of fellowship programmes does not in itself guarantee equity. Access to these supports is usually conditioned by average requirements, language certifications, work experience, age, institutional membership or availability of agreements. These conditions may be technically justifiable in certain programs, but they can also favor those who already have greater academic, cultural, and informational resources. A scholarship aimed at correcting inequalities can reproduce them when its application procedures are inaccessible to the populations it intends to benefit.

Therefore, scholarship policies must be examined not only by the amount of resources granted, but also by their distribution, sufficiency, continuity and capacity to produce results. A comprehensive policy must incorporate accessible dissemination, simplification of procedures, guidance for application, language training, academic accompaniment and support for the indirect costs of studying. It must also consider the conditions of students from rural areas, historically excluded groups, and people who lack institutional networks to access national and international opportunities.

Mobility and postgraduate scholarships can strengthen scientific, professional and intercultural training, but their contribution to development depends on the ability to connect the knowledge acquired with national and local innovation systems. Without reintegration strategies, research networks, professional recognition and job opportunities, international mobility can mainly benefit individual trajectories or contribute to the permanent migration of skilled personnel. Educational financing must therefore be linked to a policy of scientific and productive development that makes it possible to take advantage of the investment made socially.

The fourth conclusion concerns the relationship between higher education and the labour market. The work shows a persistent mismatch between the expansion of academic training and the capacity of economies

to generate stable, productive occupations linked to the fields of study. This gap is manifested in overqualification, underemployment, informality, professional unemployment, low wages and occupations that do not correspond to the training received. Its effects are especially intense among young people and groups that face structural discrimination.

However, this disconnect should not be attributed solely to an alleged lack of relevance of universities. It also responds to economies with low diversification, limited investment in research and development, low technological incorporation and a high proportion of informal employment. Adapting curricula can improve job placement, but it will not solve the shortage of qualified jobs on its own. Educational relevance requires a productive policy capable of creating spaces where knowledge, creativity and innovation can be converted into economic and social value.

Higher education institutions must strengthen the relationship with the productive and social sectors without reducing their mission to the immediate satisfaction of business demands. Training must integrate technical, digital, investigative and socio-emotional skills, but also critical thinking, ethical responsibility, citizenship and lifelong learning skills. In a scenario marked by automation, technological transformation and occupational instability, preparation for a single job is insufficient. Higher education must train people capable of adapting, innovating, undertaking, researching and participating in the transformation of their environments.

Technical and technological education occupies a strategic place in this articulation. Strengthening them can help reduce skills mismatches and respond to sectors that require specialized skills. However, it should be avoided that this training is considered a less prestigious route intended exclusively for low-income populations. Technical education must be integrated into flexible systems, with possibilities for academic continuity, recognition of competencies, mobility between levels and close links with innovation and territorial development.

Based on these results, it is concluded that educational, labor, scientific and economic policies cannot continue to be designed in a fragmented manner. The expansion of education without the creation of skilled employment favors the inflation of credentials; training without equity reproduces inequalities; unaccompanied scholarships benefit unequally; and

curricular updating without productive transformation has limited effects. Cross-sectoral governance is required that articulates objectives, resources, information and evaluation systems.

This articulation must be based on evidence. States and institutions need information systems capable of tracking trajectories from entry to graduation and job placement. It is not enough to measure coverage, enrolment or number of graduates. It is necessary to analyse learning, permanence, employment conditions, correspondence between training and occupation, economic returns, intergenerational mobility and inequalities between groups and territories. Without this tracking, policies risk confusing expansion with progress and certification with learning.

In summary, the main conclusion of *Education, Equity and Development: Economics of Education and Social Mobility* is that the transformative potential of education depends on its ability to integrate quality, equity, relevance and social recognition. The goal should not be to produce a greater number of credentials, but to develop capacities that allow people to understand, participate in and transform their reality. Nor is it enough to prepare workers for existing markets; it is necessary to train citizens, researchers, professionals and communities capable of building new possibilities for development.

Education can continue to be a privileged route of social mobility, but only when learning opportunities are not determined by origin and when the knowledge acquired finds institutional and productive conditions to unfold. Coverage opens up the system; quality gives it content; equity distributes its possibilities; and decent work turns training into well-being and autonomy. If these dimensions remain separate, the educational promise is weakened. When they are articulated, education ceases to be an accumulation of certificates and becomes a living force for transformation, justice and shared development.

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