

# Higher education in Ecuador, the pandemic, and the teaching profession

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**Abstract:** The world has changed as a result of the emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic: relationships between human beings have been limited or are now remote, in order to safeguard health. Education was also impacted, since millions of students of all educational levels were forced to take their classes away from the classroom, in virtuality.

This sudden and forced change revealed the unequal nature of society in terms of access to wealth, work and technology. Additionally, the lack of a correct response

by the Government to guarantee the rights to education and health was also evident. In this reality, social organizations in Ecuador played an important role in denouncing, mobilizing and resisting.

The pandemic brought with it confinement and lockdown. In Ecuador, by the year 2020, the number of students who were left without face-to-face classes, according to the UNICEF report (2020), was of 4.6 million; plus, the more than 700 thousand in higher education.

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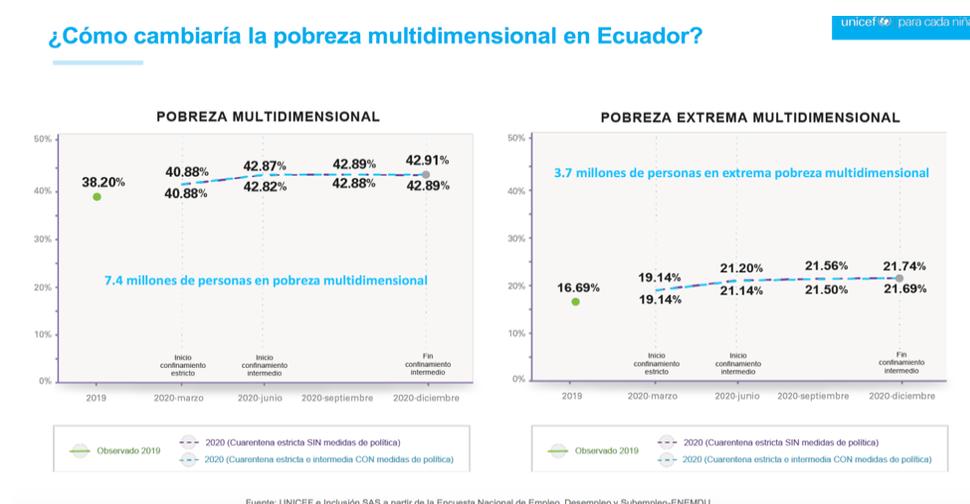
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This calamitous situation made the inequality of the Ecuadorian society more evident, for a high percentage of households found it difficult, if not impossible, to guarantee the study conditions for their sons and daughters, due to the social gap and the seriousness of the events. The gap widened much more

and, according to UNICEF (2020), the pandemic and the lockdown in 2020 threw 1.4 million people into extreme poverty and 1.8 million people into poverty. Thus, in 2020, multidimensional poverty reached 7.4 million people and extreme multidimensional poverty reached 3.7 million people, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. How would multidimensional poverty change in Ecuador?

Figure 1



To make matters worse, millions of jobs were lost on account of the pandemic and lockdown. According to Maria Becerra, Edwin Valencia, Renato Rebelo (2021), "during the pandemic, especially in 2020, the indicators fell drastically due to the increase of unemployment to half a million people" (p:445). Another factor that became more evident is the technological gap, since Ecuador at the time was one of the least connected countries in Latin America, as pointed out by the digital newspaper *El País* (2020). "The Minister of Education, Monserrat Creamer, has recognized that 70% of students have difficulty in accessing online education, but the data was there since 2018: the percentage of households with Internet

access was of 37.17% nationally and 16.07% in rural areas, according to the Institute of Statistics and Census". But the problem was not only connectivity, but also the millions of people in extreme poverty and the 1.8 million people living in poverty. Additionally, after the pandemic in 2020, multidimensional poverty reached 7.4 million people and extreme multidimensional poverty reached 3.7 million people, as shown by the number of devices per household to connect to virtual classrooms (Figure 1), the poor teacher training, the limited technological infrastructure of institutions, and -above all- the absence of education-oriented public policies.

The governmental response to the pandemic was totally misguided, since teachers and educational personnel were laid off, budget were cut, and regulations were passed to place the burden of the pandemic on the weak backs of the Ecuadorian people. An example of this is the famous Law of Humanitarian Support, in which the Ecuadorian Ombudsman's Office (2020) declared: "We are concerned about the approval of the bill to combat the COVID 19 health crisis, because it contains deeply regressive labor reforms for the workers' rights". It must be pointed out that their wages were already reduced, and the hiring laws were made more flexible. However, this law left the great economic powers untouched, their debt with the Treasury was condoned, and they were actually given more perks. As a whole, it totally contradicted the constitutional role of the State as a guarantor of rights.

The educational policies followed a similar path. The pandemic was taken as an excuse to reduce budgets on basic education, high schools, and universities and polytechnic schools, in violation of the Constitution, which states in Article 165.2 that the State of Emergency allows for: "Using public funds for other purposes, except those related to health and education". However, the Constitutional Court of Ecuador tipped its scales towards the government and brought down the claims of unconstitutionality filed by various sectors.

Nowadays, after a change of government, nothing has changed. The seriousness of

the pandemic continues to unmask the existing inequalities in Ecuadorian society. Currently, it is all about going back to on-site educational activities, but without having solved the delicate situation of its institutions, which are totally deteriorated, and do not have sufficient infrastructure to ensure the health of students and teachers; let alone the quality education according to the current demands of society.

Regarding higher education, the situation is no different. The installed capacity does not allow for a safe return to face-to-face classes, according to current needs. Some institutions have done so, but due to the new outbreaks, classes have been temporarily suspended. On the other hand, the executive is debating a proposal to reform the higher education regulations in the country, which has a free-market orientation and seeks to create more favorable conditions for private universities, including international universities, to the detriment of the public university.

Faced with this reality, social organizations and in the field of higher education, university unions, mainly the Federation of University and Polytechnic Professors of Ecuador (FEPUPE) and the Federation of University Students of Ecuador (FEUE) question the harsh response given in times of a pandemic. They have been forced to present claims, enter into a legal struggle, and even carry out even the mobilizations, to ensure the true feelings of the people of Ecuador prevail.

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