









ORIGINAL

## Analysis of the Impact of Inclusive Public Policies on Access and Retention of Vulnerable Groups in Latin American Universities

### Análisis del Impacto de Políticas Públicas Inclusivas en el Acceso y Permanencia de Grupos Vulnerables en Universidades de América Latina

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** educational inclusion in Latin American universities poses a major challenge due to historical inequalities affecting vulnerable students, including those from low-income backgrounds, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and individuals with disabilities.

**Objective:** to analyze the impact of inclusive public policies on the access and persistence of these students during the period 2015-2025.

**Method:** a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative analysis of administrative records (enrollment, dropout, and graduation data) and structured surveys with qualitative techniques such as semi-structured interviews. This design allowed for evidence triangulation to strengthen the validity of the findings.

**Results:** enrollment of vulnerable students increased significantly due to scholarships and special quotas; however, their dropout rates were higher and on-time graduation rates lower compared to non-vulnerable students. Limited access to tutoring, low levels of academic support, and experiences of discrimination were identified as factors negatively influencing persistence and sense of belonging. **Conclusions:** while inclusive policies expanded access, their effectiveness in improving persistence and academic success depends on comprehensive implementation, institutional governance, and program continuity, underscoring the need for more robust and sustainable approaches.

**Keywords:** Educational Inclusion; Persistence; Public Policies; Higher Education; Vulnerability.

#### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** la inclusión educativa en las universidades latinoamericanas representa un desafío significativo debido a las desigualdades históricas que afectan a estudiantes de bajos ingresos, indígenas, afrodescendientes y personas con discapacidad.

**Objetivo:** analizar el impacto de las políticas públicas inclusivas en el acceso y la permanencia de estudiantes vulnerables durante el periodo 2015-2025.

**Método:** se adoptó un enfoque mixto que combinó el análisis cuantitativo de registros administrativos (matrícula, deserción y graduación) y encuestas estructuradas, junto con técnicas cualitativas como entrevistas semiestructuradas, permitiendo la triangulación de evidencias para fortalecer la validez de los hallazgos.

**Resultados:** la matrícula de estudiantes vulnerables aumentó significativamente debido a becas y cupos especiales; sin embargo, sus tasas de deserción fueron más altas y la graduación en tiempo más baja en comparación con estudiantes no vulnerables. Factores como el acceso limitado a tutorías, bajo acompañamiento académico y experiencias de discriminación influyeron negativamente en la permanencia.

**Conclusiones:** si bien las políticas inclusivas lograron ampliar el acceso, su efectividad en la permanencia y el éxito académico depende de una implementación integral, una gobernanza institucional sólida y la continuidad de los programas, lo que subraya la necesidad de enfoques más robustos y sostenibles.

**Palabras clave:** Inclusión Educativa; Permanencia; Políticas Públicas; Educación Superior; Vulnerabilidad.

## INTRODUCTION

Educational inclusion at the university level is an essential component of social justice in Latin America. However, in the face of persistent structural inequalities, it is urgent to understand how public policies effectively contribute to university democratization, beyond initial admission. To address this issue, it is essential to start from a solid theoretical framework. For Sen, the systemic approach to public policy should promote fundamental freedoms and choices for individuals, focusing development on the expansion of human capabilities.<sup>(1)</sup> Similarly, Fraser argues that social justice requires economic redistribution alongside cultural recognition, a duality that is often strained by international agendas and quality assurance networks.<sup>(2)</sup> These theoretical perspectives shed light on the discrepancy between stated structural objectives and the practice of inclusive policies in the region.

It has recently become clear that there is a gap in the full implementation of educational inclusion and, more critically, in the way it is researched. Academic research in Latin America has historically prioritized theoretical discussion and normative essays over robust empirical analysis. When empirical studies have been conducted, they have tended to be highly descriptive, focusing on enrollment figures without establishing statistical causal relationships. Maldonado, in a systematic review, shows that there is still a lack of robust and explanatory knowledge about the inclusion of students with disabilities and other marginalized groups.<sup>(3)</sup> Other studies suggest that mere presence at the university, without an analysis of support conditions, can become a merely symbolic process of inclusion.<sup>(4)</sup> Therefore, this study seeks to move beyond the descriptive level and toward an explanatory one, using advanced data analysis techniques to fill this gap in the regional literature.

To operationalize this methodological leap, it is necessary to define the study variables<sup>(5)</sup> precisely. In this research, “vulnerable groups” are understood to be students identified in administrative records as belonging to indigenous or Afro-descendant peoples, to the lowest income quintiles,<sup>(6,7)</sup> or with certified disabilities. “Comprehensive inclusive policy” is operationally defined not as an isolated action,<sup>(8)</sup> but as the simultaneous presence of at least three components: financing (scholarships/tuition fees), academic support (structured tutoring), and formal curricular adjustments.<sup>(9)</sup> For its part, “retention” is operationalized quantitatively as the student retention rate at the beginning of the second academic year, a critical moment when dropout rates peak.<sup>(10)</sup> Finally, “real inclusion” is measured as a composite function that integrates access, retention in the second year, and graduation within the expected curricular time frame, contrasting these metrics with the subjective perception of belonging.<sup>(11,12)</sup>

The overall objective of this study is to analyze the explanatory impact of inclusive public policies on the access and retention of these vulnerable students in Latin American universities during the period 2015-2025. The central problem is that, despite the proliferation of regulations, significant retention gaps persist. The hypothesis is that universities that apply comprehensive, inclusive policies according to the above operational definition will show statistically substantially higher retention rates than those that apply isolated measures. It is also argued that the effectiveness of these policies is moderated by institutional governance and the continuity of resources.<sup>(13,14)</sup>

To test this hypothesis, a mixed explanatory-comparative research approach is adopted. Torres and Jiménez emphasize that combining quantitative and qualitative methods strengthens the validity of the findings by allowing for triangulation.<sup>(6)</sup> Methodologically, this study is distinguished by the use of logistic regression models to estimate retention probabilities while controlling for sociodemographic variables<sup>(15,16)</sup> and survival analysis to evaluate the duration of academic trajectories,<sup>(17)</sup> thus overcoming the limitations of descriptive cross-sectional studies. Navarro et al. emphasize that these multivariate models are essential for strengthening empirical findings in complex contexts.<sup>(18)</sup>

The research is comparative between Andean, Central American, and Southern Cone universities, given that the maturity of policies varies significantly between these areas.<sup>(13,19)</sup> This design allows for capturing regional heterogeneity. While Méndez demonstrates better indicators in the Southern Cone under certain conditions.<sup>(14)</sup> Becerra and Aguilera identify severe structural limitations in contexts of low investment.<sup>(15)</sup> Finally, to

complement the statistical rigor, a qualitative analysis is applied through semi-structured interviews, which allows us to capture the hidden dynamics and narratives that numbers alone cannot reveal.<sup>(5,20)</sup> In this way, the study aims to generate solid scientific evidence for the formulation of more effective and sustainable public policies.

## **METHOD**

### **Research approach**

The study adopts a mixed (quantitative-qualitative) approach, allowing analysis of both the statistically observable effects of inclusive public policies and the subjective experiences of the actors involved. The quantitative component will identify regional patterns of access and retention, while the qualitative component will examine the meanings, perceptions, and barriers associated with inclusion in higher education.

### **Type and design of the study**

This is an explanatory-comparative empirical study with a retrospective longitudinal design covering the period 2015-2025. The purpose is to establish causal relationships between the inclusive policies implemented and the results in terms of access and retention of vulnerable students in Latin American universities.

### **Population and sample**

The study population consisted of public and private universities in Latin America with inclusive policies in place. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, based on having active, inclusive regulations, operational institutional programs, and official reports demonstrating their actual application.

This process was organized in a stratified manner according to three subregions. The Southern Cone included universities in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay; the Andean Region included Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia; and Central America included Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador. A total of 12 universities participated.

### **Units of analysis**

The units of analysis will be:

- Vulnerable students (indigenous, Afro-descendants, migrants, low-income students, and students with disabilities).
- Inclusive institutional and government policies (scholarships, differentiated quotas, tutoring programs, psychosocial support, curricular adjustments).
- Impact indicators: admission rates, retention in the second and third years, average academic performance, perception of inclusion, and sense of belonging.

### **Data collection techniques and instruments**

Two types of instruments were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

For quantitative data, a questionnaire was administered to students, consisting of structured items applied to vulnerable students ( $n \approx 1\,200$ ) using a five-level Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree). The questionnaire assessed three main dimensions:

- Academic experiences, related to their trajectory and performance.
- Institutional support received, linked to services, scholarships, and accompaniment.
- Sense of belonging and perception of inclusion within university life.

This quantitative component was complemented by a review of institutional databases, including enrollment, dropout, and graduation rates for the period analyzed.

For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with coordinators, teachers, and administrators. Open-ended questions were used to explore perceptions, experiences, and institutional strategies related to the implementation of inclusive policies. The interviews addressed topics such as regulatory implementation, identification of barriers, availability of support, and assessment of the impact on vulnerable students. Fifty key informants participated.

Focus groups: 15 were held with 10 students enrolled in inclusion programs to gain insight into academic experiences, available support, and perceived challenges. A documentary analysis of regulations, institutional plans, and inclusion policies complemented this component.

### **Validation of instruments**

The scripts used in the interviews and surveys were reviewed by a group of specialists in educational inclusion, who evaluated the relevance of the questions, their suitability to the university context, and their alignment with the study's objectives.

In the quantitative component, a pilot study was conducted with 25 participants, including students and

teachers, to assess the clarity of the items and the instrument's functioning. Using the obtained data, Cronbach's alpha was calculated, yielding  $\alpha = 0,89$ , indicating high internal consistency of the questionnaire.

For the qualitative component, the information generated in the interviews and focus groups was compared with similar studies, thereby strengthening the interpretive validity and ensuring that the results corresponded to the policies in force at the universities analyzed.

### Data Collection Procedure

Data collection began with the selection of participating universities and the collection of administrative information for the period 2015-2025. Structured surveys were administered online to vulnerable students who provided informed consent. At the same time, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted in person or virtually with participants' prior authorization. Our qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in NVivo, while quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS. All information was stored anonymously and coded to ensure confidentiality.

### Data analysis techniques

Quantitative data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics, applying both descriptive analyses and inferential models. To examine the factors influencing student retention, logistic regression was used, a technique appropriate because it estimates the probability of a binary outcome (remaining or dropping out) based on explanatory variables. In this model, the dependent variable was university retention, while the independent variables included access to institutional support, level of vulnerability, participation in inclusive programs, and previous academic performance.

To analyze student trajectories over time, continuity analysis was used, which is appropriate for measuring the duration until a relevant academic event such as withdrawal, change of major, or graduation. Finally, multivariate models were applied to isolate the specific effect of inclusive policies, controlling for demographic, socioeconomic, and academic variables.

Qualitative data from interviews were processed using thematic content analysis, following a systematic procedure that included open reading, initial coding, code grouping, and construction of central categories. Special attention was paid to three areas: experiences of inclusion, institutional barriers, and assessment of support. To ensure analytical rigor, source triangulation was used, contrasting the perceptions of students, teachers, and coordinators with institutional documents.

### Ethical considerations

The study complied with the principles established in the Declaration of Helsinki and with applicable ethical standards for social research. All participants received clear information about the study objectives and signed an informed consent form, guaranteeing voluntariness, anonymity, and confidentiality. The right to withdraw at any time without consequences was ensured, and practices that could generate risk or bias toward vulnerable populations were avoided.

### Limitations

Unequal data availability across universities and variability in the implementation of inclusive policies were identified, which could affect the comparability of some indicators. However, methodological triangulation, the complementary use of quantitative and qualitative techniques, and cross-checking with institutional documents mitigated these effects, strengthening the reliability and robustness of the findings.

## RESULTS

This section presents the results obtained from the different sources of information in the study. Quantitative data were combined with qualitative perceptions to offer a more complete view of the dynamics of access, retention, and inclusion in the universities analyzed.

The findings are organized into three thematic areas: the first examines the gap between admissions and academic continuity; the second addresses institutional factors that influence the effectiveness of inclusive policies; and the third analyzes student experiences and the institutional environment. The articulation of statistical data, testimonies, and institutional documents offers a broad and coherent view of the realities observed.

### The gap between student access and retention

Institutional data reveal that access for vulnerable students has increased significantly. Between the periods 2005-2015 and 2015-2025, enrollment rose from approximately 20 000 to more than 33 000 vulnerable students, while enrollment of non-vulnerable students grew from 50 000 to nearly 80 000. This increase demonstrates an expansion of admission opportunities for historically excluded groups.

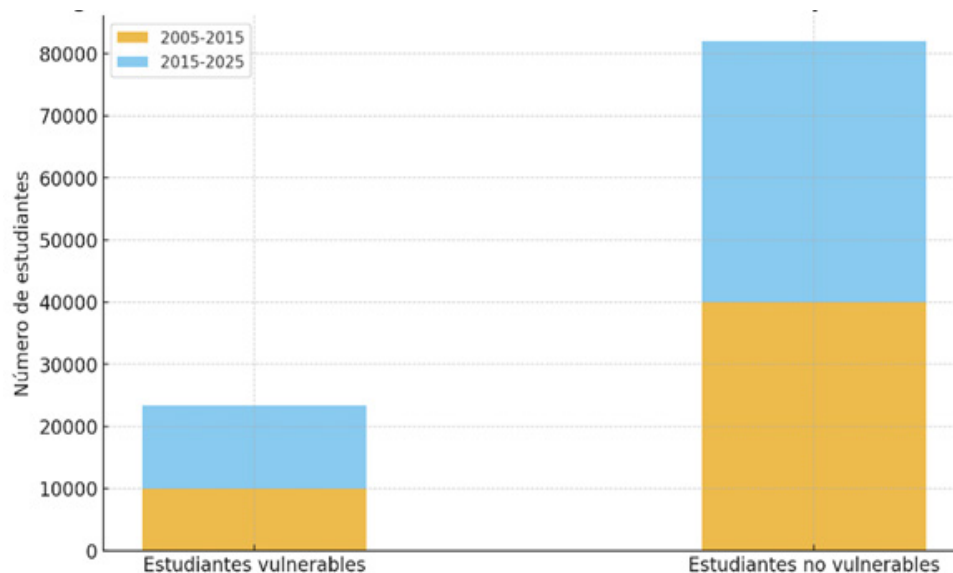


Figure 1. Evolution of enrollment among vulnerable and non-vulnerable students

However, this progress in access does not translate into better retention rates. Dropout rates in the second year reach 28 % among vulnerable students, compared to 15 % among non-vulnerable students. This difference confirms that, although more vulnerable students are enrolling, their academic continuity remains fragile.

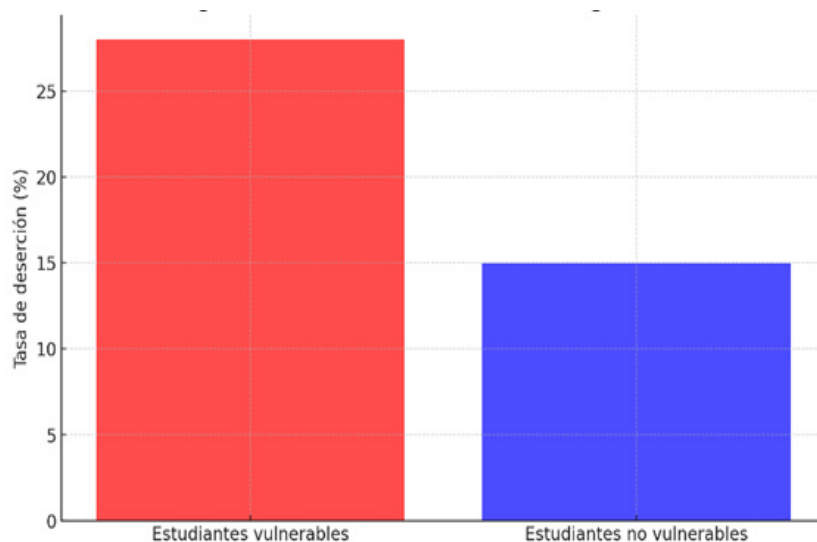


Figure 2. Dropout rates in the second year

Interviews with coordinators and teachers agree that this gap is mainly due to insufficient coverage of tutoring and academic support, as well as structural limitations in monitoring student progress. This is reflected in the survey, where only 40 % of vulnerable students reported receiving academic support, and only 18 % attributed their retention to tutoring.

Taken together, this evidence shows that inclusive policies have improved access but have not strengthened the mechanisms necessary to sustain retention, creating a critical gap between enrollment and continuity.

#### **Institutional factors that limit the effectiveness of inclusive policies**

The interviews showed that the efficacy of inclusive policies is strongly conditioned by three institutional factors: dependence on financial resources, regulatory disarticulation, and high administrative turnover. These limitations lead to discontinuity in programs, inequality between universities, and a lack of systematic evaluation.

The impact of these weaknesses is clearly evident in academic trajectories. Vulnerable students have a 42 % graduation rate, a 38 % academic delay rate, and a 20 % cumulative dropout rate. In contrast, non-vulnerable students have rates of 60 %, 25 %, and 15 %, respectively.



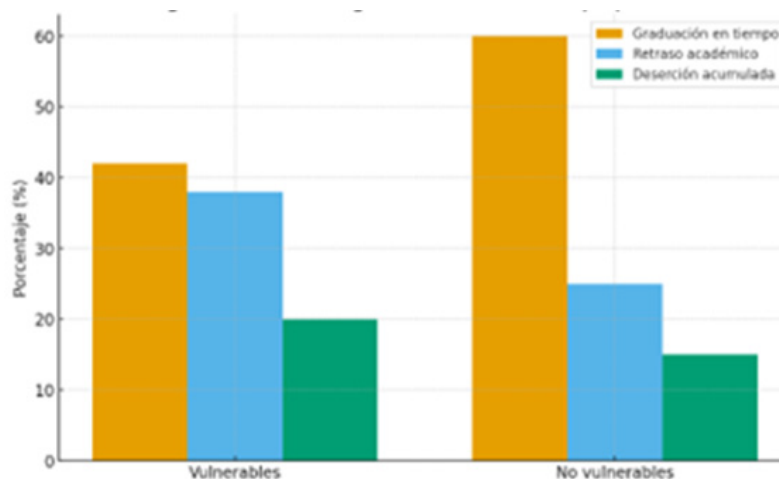


Figure 3. Graduation rates and cumulative trajectory

Documentary analysis supports these findings: although most institutions have inclusion policies in place, many lack stable budgets, monitoring indicators, and evaluation mechanisms.

### Student experiences and institutional environment

Focus groups showed that, beyond financial support, vulnerable students experience daily barriers that affect their well-being: discrimination (30 %), administrative difficulties, lack of accessible materials, and social isolation. These findings help explain why the sense of belonging, which is fundamental to retention, stands at 55 %, a moderate value despite institutional efforts.

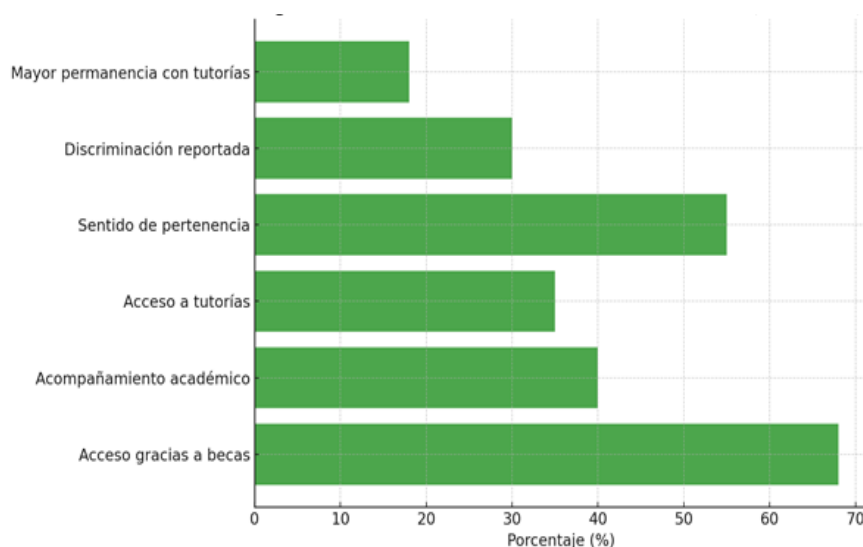


Figure 4. Results of structured surveys

The survey also shows that although 68 % of vulnerable students accessed university thanks to scholarships, only 35 % reported access to tutoring, and only 40 % perceived academic support. This imbalance between financial and educational support is consistent with the interviews, in which teachers noted that diversity training and institutional awareness remain insufficient.

Triangulation with institutional documents confirms that inclusion is recognized as a strategic priority, but its implementation remains limited. This reinforces the idea that building an inclusive institutional climate based on respect, cultural recognition, and safe spaces is as important as material support in ensuring student retention.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm findings from similar studies and reveal essential findings, among which the following stand out: improved access to higher education for vulnerable students. At the same time, retention and graduation show much less progress. This aligns with previous reviews of university inclusion in Latin America.<sup>(3,4)</sup> Still, our findings provide broader, triangulated evidence, showing that the gap between admission and continuity persists even in institutions that have adopted inclusive policies. As noted in the research

by Álvarez et al.<sup>(9)</sup>, equity policies tend to focus on access; however, this study demonstrates that inclusion depends on the interaction among academic resources, institutional infrastructure, and students' subjective experiences.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data reveals a fundamental tension: although scholarships and special quotas facilitate admission, vulnerable students face difficulties associated with a lack of tutoring, limited academic support, and administrative obstacles, findings that partially coincide with previous findings.<sup>(14,21)</sup> However, our study provides more nuanced evidence: scholarships are necessary but not sufficient, as many students continue to experience discrimination, isolation, or a lack of adapted resources.<sup>(11,22)</sup> This is consistent with studies on socioeconomic and ethnic inequality in higher education,<sup>(12,23)</sup> suggesting that redistributive policies should be complemented by strategies for cultural recognition and inclusive environments, as proposed by Fraser<sup>(2)</sup>.

In terms of academic outcomes, differences in graduation rates, delays, and cumulative dropout rates show that inclusive policies are not effective for all institutions. In other words, the presence of regulations does not always translate into real improvements, as other limitations may exist, such as a lack of infrastructure, insufficient budget, or the absence of specialized equipment.<sup>(24,25)</sup> This finding challenges studies that assume that regulatory formalization alone guarantees inclusion<sup>(7)</sup> and supports perspectives that emphasize the importance of sustained institutional capacities.<sup>(26,27)</sup> In this sense, our findings expand existing knowledge by demonstrating how alignment or misalignment among policies, resources, and organizational culture shapes students' educational trajectories in vulnerable situations.

Comparative regional evidence indicates that the systems that achieve greater equity are those with stable institutional structures and continuous monitoring mechanisms.<sup>(28,29)</sup> In terms of public policy, the findings suggest the need to move toward comprehensive models of inclusion that combine sustained funding, political and administrative coordination, curricular adjustments, monitoring indicators, and strategies that strengthen the sense of belonging.<sup>(30)</sup>

The research also shows that the institutional climate has a decisive impact on retention. The 30 % of students who report discrimination, along with the low percentage who experience effective tutoring, reinforce the idea that inclusion requires transforming interpersonal relationships, teaching practices, and university dynamics.<sup>(24,31)</sup> This complements studies on student belonging<sup>(11)</sup> and provides a more complex approach to how socio-emotional factors affect retention. These results demonstrate that the perception of support and cultural recognition can be as decisive as economic resources or formal policies.

Finally, although the unequal availability of data across universities is a limitation, the methodological triangulation used enabled robust conclusions.<sup>(6,8)</sup> Future research could expand the sample to more countries, incorporate longitudinal analyses, or evaluate the impact of specific policies on vulnerable populations, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of university inclusion in the region.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study provide a broader understanding of university inclusion in Latin America than traditional measures of enrollment or retention offer. The evidence obtained shows that inclusion cannot be reduced to increased access; rather, it depends on the simultaneous articulation of three dimensions: adequate academic resources, solid institutional capacities, and a sociocultural environment that promotes student well-being. This approach clearly shows that inclusive public policies only generate lasting effects when they operate coherently at these different levels, overcoming the fragmented readings that predominated in the regional literature.

Likewise, comparative results between Latin American subregions reveal that differences in retention and academic progress are not explained by the existence of formal policies, but rather by the actual capacity of institutions to implement them. Inclusive policies should not be evaluated solely on their design, but also on governance, financial sustainability, and operational stability.

In terms of education policy, actions that strengthen the retention of vulnerable students were identified, including: the implementation of early warning systems to detect dropout risks from the first months, the creation of mandatory tutoring with verifiable follow-up, the allocation of annual budgets to ensure continuity, the institutionalization of curricular adjustments for more vulnerable students, and the establishment of anti-discrimination protocols with secure reporting channels.

Taken together, the results show that moving toward true inclusion requires transforming institutional structures and the cultural frameworks that underpin the student experience. This study provides evidence for understanding these transformations. It paves the way for further research into the conditions that enable Latin American universities to guarantee complete, equitable, and culturally meaningful educational trajectories.

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