

Changes in Enrollment and Socioeconomic Composition of the Colombian Higher Education System under the Free Tuition Policy*

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Abstract: Colombia has followed the global trend of massification of higher education. However, in recent years, the Colombian State has sought to guarantee education rights for populations with significant access barriers by implementing a gradual free tuition policy. In 2019, the Duque administration initiated a strategy to subsidize tuition for vulnerable populations enrolled in public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including indigenous communities, victims of armed conflict, and individuals living in poverty or with limited income-generating capacity. In 2024, the Petro administration expanded its beneficiary population and improved the conditions to maintain the benefit. This paper utilizes administrative data to investigate whether the free tuition policy has effectively increased access to higher education for vulnerable populations or merely shifted the funding source without altering the socioeconomic profile of higher education students. This study examines the period from 2019 to 2024, covering the start of the free tuition policy through the first year of its new direction. The research highlights the challenges of implementing the universality of higher education in a middle-income country, particularly given the geographic disparities in the availability of HEIs.

Keywords: higher education, educational policy, equality of educational opportunity, education financing, SDG 4, Colombia

Introduction

Since the year 2000, there has been a significant increase in access to undergraduate education worldwide (Figure 1). The global gross enrollment ratio has risen from 19.0% in 2000 to 43.3% in 2023. In Colombia, this ratio increased from 23.9% to 55.4% during the same period, mirroring the trend of the Latin American and Caribbean region but exhibiting greater volatility around that trend. However, the difference concerning the OECD members has been maintained at approximately twenty percentage points.

Between 2019 and the second half of 2024, undergraduate enrollment in Colombian higher education increased by 6.54% (Figure 2). After accounting for the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational pathways of the in-age population, this rise can be attributed to the differing trends observed in public and private higher education institutions (HEIs). Specifically, private higher education experienced a decline of 9.29% in enrollments. In comparison, public higher education experienced a significant 21.26% increase during the same period. Consequently, the share of enrolments in public HEIs as a percentage of the total enrolments increased from 51.83% to 58.98%.

A key factor influencing this enrollment pattern in public education is the gradual implementation of the free tuition policy, which began in 2019 and was further expanded in 2022. This policy aims to promote access to undergraduate education in Colombian public HEIs for young people from socioeconomically vulnerable backgrounds.

This paper examined whether the free tuition policy enhanced access to higher education for vulnerable populations or simply became a funding source without changing the socioeconomic diversity of higher education students.

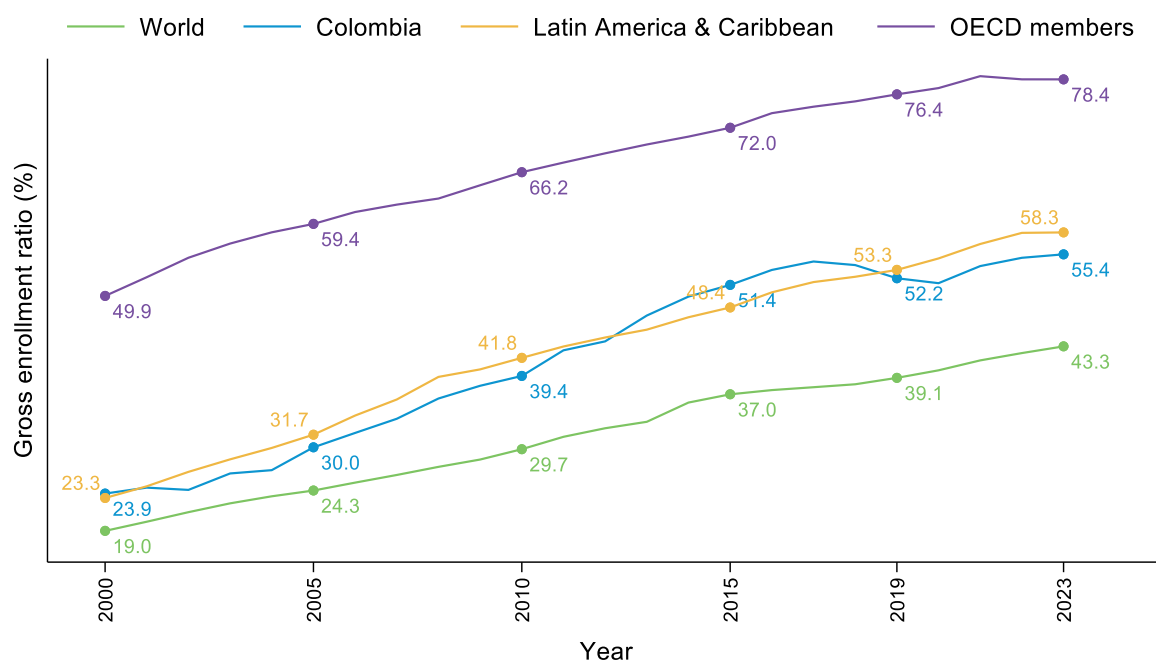


Figure 1. Gross Enrollment Ratio for Tertiary Education

Source: SNIES (MEN, 2022b, 2024) & World Development Indicators (The World Bank Group, 2025)

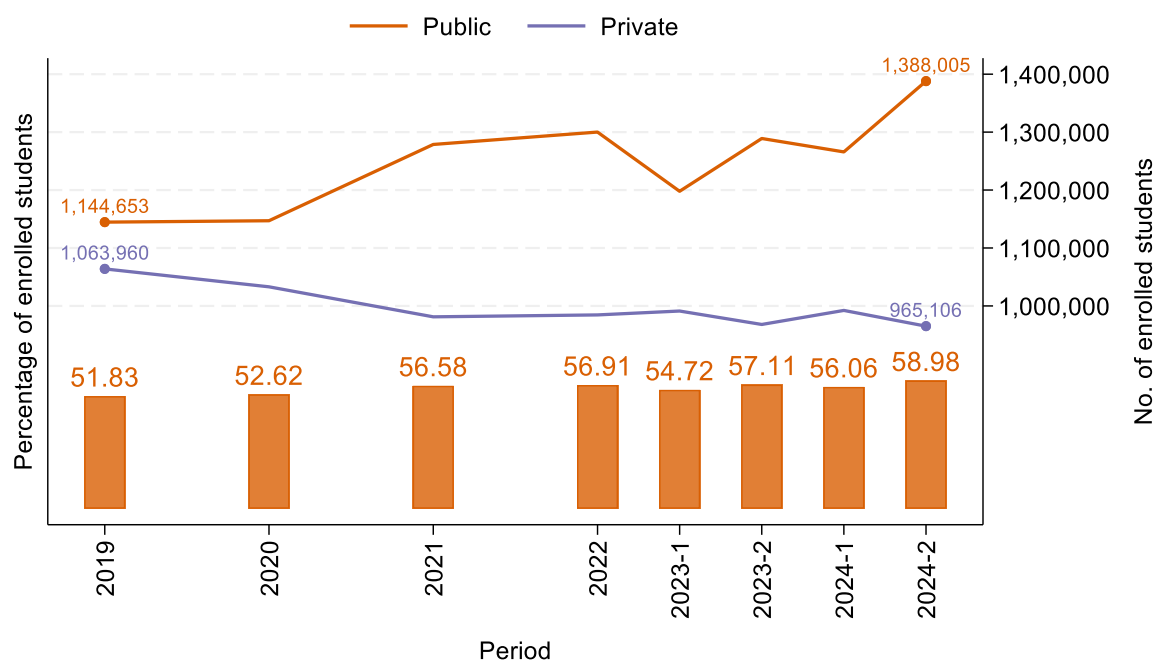


Figure 2. Enrollment Statistics (Percentage and Number) of Colombian Undergraduate Students by Type of HEIs

Source: SNIES (MEN, 2025c)

The Progression to a Free Tuition Policy, 2019-2024

The Duque administration (2018-2022) gradually implemented free tuition for undergraduate education in public HEIs. The Generación E program was launched in the first half of 2019 as a novel initiative aimed at promoting excellence and broadening access to higher education. It was structured with three components (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia [MEN], 2022a). The Excellence component focused on young high school graduates in socioeconomically vulnerable conditions who had excelled in the standardized national exam at the end of secondary education (Saber 11° exam). It granted an educational loan to students accepted to begin studies in an accredited public or private HEI. If a student graduated, their credit debt was forgiven; however, if they dropped out, they were required to repay the debt. The Team component provided additional resources for operating and investment to be utilized in conjunction with public HEIs, thereby enhancing the quality of the sector. The extra resources were primarily used for student well-being and retention, teacher training, research, regionalization, and program adaptation projects, as well as physical and technological infrastructure and equipment.

The Equity component did not take into account academic merit; instead, it granted a subsidy to socioeconomically vulnerable students who were accepted to begin studies at a defined list of public HEIs. The *Sisbén* classification is one of the principal instruments used to identify socioeconomically vulnerable individuals in Colombia. It categorizes individuals and households according to their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics to target social programs and subsidies at these two levels. The Equity component provided benefits to the population classified in the *Sisbén* as being in extreme poverty, moderate poverty, and vulnerability. Additionally, the component provided benefits to ethnic groups and victims of armed conflict. This component restricted the number of available places to a limit set by the 61 HEIs that participated (Figure 3). In contrast to the Excellence component, if the student did not complete their undergraduate studies, they were exempt from repaying the tuition fees generated at the time (León Gil, 2019).

In 2020, the Ministry of Education established the Solidarity Fund for Education. It implemented measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on dropout rates in the education sector (Decree 662 of 2020). The Fund established the framework for the adoption of free tuition as a State policy. Through Article 27 of Law 2155 of 2021 (the Social Investment Law), the *Matrícula Cero* strategy was created. The free tuition policy was expanded to include students from Colombia's three lowest socioeconomic strata (from six strata), defined by housing conditions and geographic location. This expansion guaranteed permanent resources for undergraduate tuition in 63 public HEIs, integrating the Generation E Program and the Solidarity Fund for Education as financing mechanisms.

The Free Tuition Policy started in the first half of 2022, based on the regulations outlined in Decree 1667 of 2021 (Figure 3). Indeed, the benefit was expanded to students in the first three strata in 2022 and to those in a socioeconomically vulnerable condition according to the new version of *Sisbén* classification (*Sisbén IV*) in 2023. In 2024, the Petro administration extended its beneficiary population, principally in terms of age and nationality, and improved the conditions to maintain the benefit. The new free tuition policy is known as *Puedo Estudiar* and includes 67 HEIs.

The number of beneficiaries increased significantly in 2023, likely due to the inclusion of students targeted by the *Sisbén* classification. There was also an increase in 2024, following the changes introduced by the Petro administration.

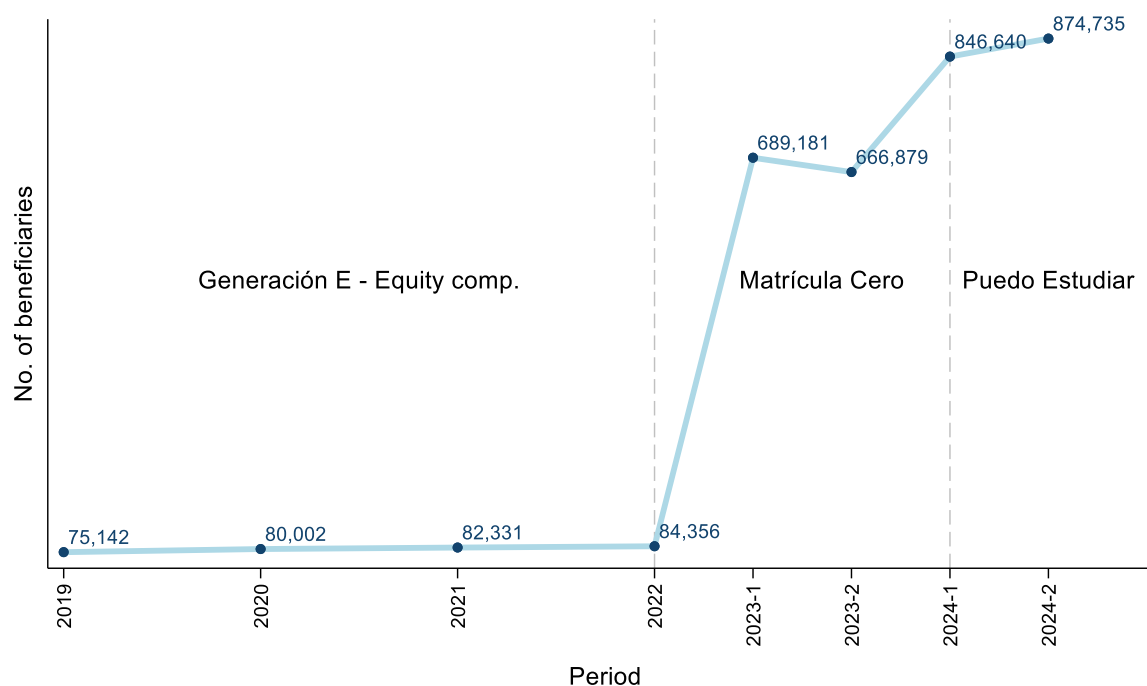


Figure 3. Number of Beneficiaries of the Free Tuition Policy

Source: MEN (2025b)

Although the number of beneficiaries increased over time, their composition remained relatively unchanged (Table 1). The participation of vulnerable populations was approximately 77% or higher, primarily represented by the Sisbén criterion. The next group with higher representation was the victims of the armed conflict, at up to 17%. Students who received free tuition based on the ethnic population criteria had a reduction in their participation from 7.15% in the Generación E program to 5.36% under the Free Tuition Policy in 2024. This reduction was attributed to the contribution of Afro-descendant ethnicities (NARP). It likely resulted from the inclusion of the NARP population in the program based on another criterion.

Table 1. Percentages of Acceptance Criteria for Beneficiaries of the Free Tuition Policy

	Generación E - Equity component	Free Tuition Policy		
Criterion	2019 - Aug 2022	2022	2023	2024
Ethnic population				
Roma	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Indigenous	2.64	2.75	2.95	2.81
Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquera (NARP)	4.50	1.95	2.40	2.54
Victims of the armed conflict	12.00	15.23	16.86	16.04
Person with disabilities (self-recognized)		0.44	0.56	0.59
Vulnerable population				
Sisbén	80.85	48.94	60.70	58.95
Stratum		30.68	16.51	19.06

Source: MEN (2022a, 2025a)

Methodology and Data

This article presents an exploratory study focusing on undergraduate students classified as part of the socioeconomically vulnerable population, according to the Sisbén system and stratum criteria established by the free tuition policy rules. The data used in this study were obtained from various administrative information systems of the Colombian Ministry of Education. These included the National Higher Education Information System (SNIES), which provided aggregated data on first-semester and enrolled students by HEI, as well as the Prevention and Analysis of Dropout in Higher Education Institutions System (SPADIES 3.0), which provided first-semester and enrolled students numbers by HEI based on the Sisbén and stratum classifications. Additionally, this research obtained information regarding the number of beneficiaries by HEI and academic period through a request for access to public information.

The SPADIES data allowed this study to identify students experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability who may qualify for free tuition based on their responses to the Saber 11° exam questionnaire upon completing secondary school. However, a student's vulnerability may change once they enter higher education. In some instances, students may provide inaccurate household information to secure eligibility for the free tuition policy. Therefore, the results about the evolution of the social composition of students in the Colombian higher education system should be interpreted as a proxy of their actual composition.

This sum of information facilitated the constitution of an annual database covering the years 2019 to 2022, as well as semi-annual data for 2023 to 2024. As of the conclusion of this article, enrollment information categorized by Sisbén and socioeconomic strata for 2024 has not yet been made available in the SPADIES system.

Results and Discussions

The geographic distribution of enrolled students in Colombian undergraduate programs remained essentially unchanged during the implementation of the Free Tuition Policy (Figure 4). The students were concentrated in the Andean region, accounting for approximately 80% of the total student population. The Caribbean region accounted for approximately 11%, and the Pacific region with 8%. The areas with fewer students were Insular, Orinoco, and Amazon. The Insular region began 2019 with 108 students, reached its peak in 2021 with 918, but ended with 289 students in the second half of 2024. In 2019, the Orinoco region had fewer students than the Amazon region. Still, it has experienced continued growth in students since then, surpassing the Amazon region in student numbers.

Figure 5 shows the percentage of students receiving free tuition in Colombian higher education. Generally, regions with lower population density, which were primarily served by public HEIs, exhibited higher coverage rates. This tendency was particularly noticeable in the first year of the Puedo Estudiar program, which provided the highest number of students with free tuition.

During the Generación E program (2019-2021), free tuition coverage was limited, except in the Insular region, which had the highest percentage of students benefiting. In 2021, this region achieved a peak coverage rate of 81.05%. The following regions in coverage were the Amazon and the Orinoco areas. Still, they had significantly lower coverage, with both falling below 21%.

In 2022, the first year of the Matrícula Cero program saw a moderate increase in the number of beneficiaries under the free tuition policy. By 2023, at least 50% of students in most regions had benefited from this policy, except for the Andean and Caribbean regions. In 2024, the Caribbean region surpassed this threshold. The coverage of students receiving free tuition is nearly complete in the Amazon and Insular regions, while in the Orinoco region, eight out of ten students are benefiting from free education.

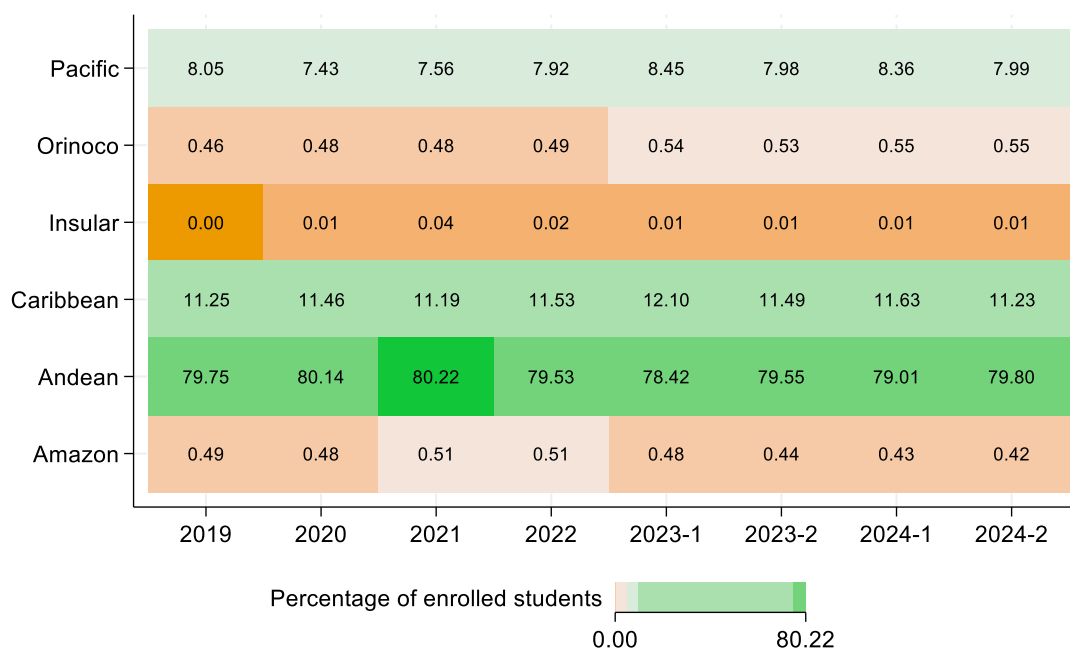


Figure 4. Percentage of Regional Enrolled Students in Colombian Higher Education

Source: SNIES (MEN, 2025c)

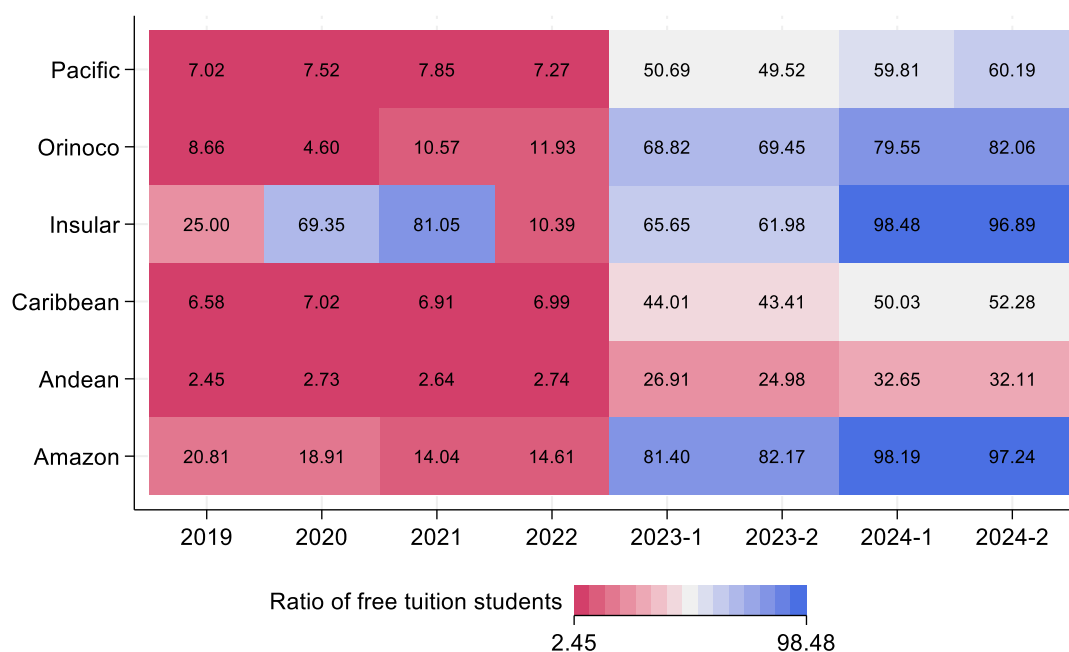


Figure 5. Percentage of Free Tuition Students over Regional Enrolled Students in Colombian Higher Education

Source: MEN(2025b) and SNIES (MEN, 2025c)

The public HEIs in Colombia, which were part of the free tuition policy between 2019 and 2023, showed a higher representation of socioeconomically vulnerable populations, using the Sisbén and strata criteria, than all Colombian HEIs (Figures 6 and 7). Although both aggregations of HEIs showed an increasing trend, the participation gap of these vulnerable groups between HEIs that offer free tuition and the total number of HEIs had decreased over time.

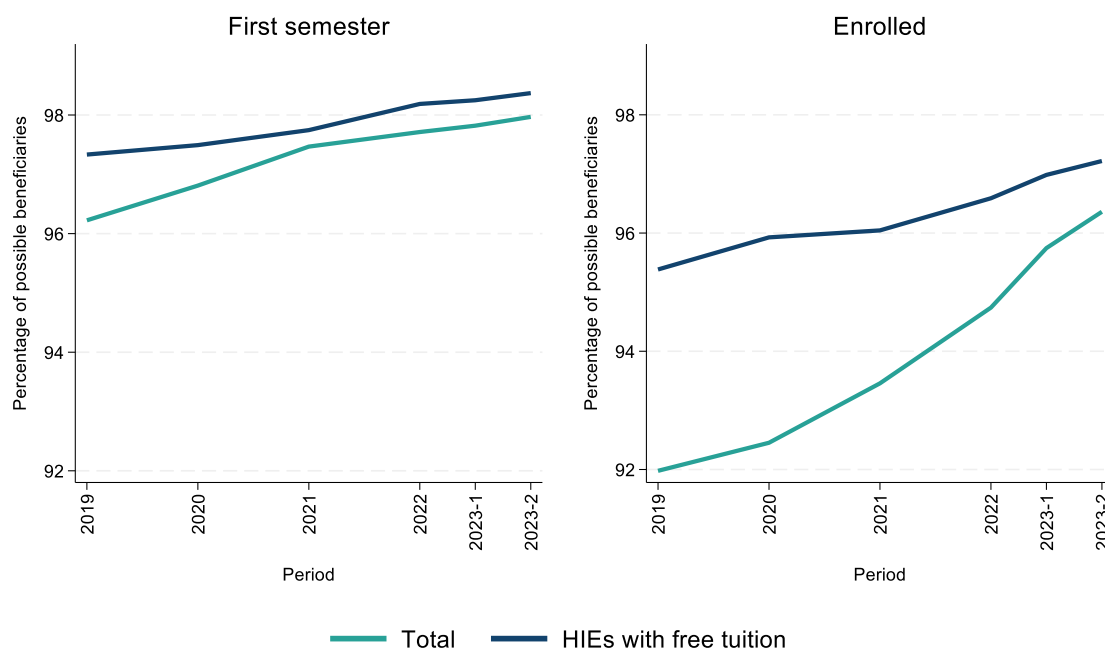


Figure 6. Percentage of Potential Beneficiaries Categorized by Strata Criterion in HEIs with Free Tuition and in Total HEIs
Source: SPADIES (MEN, 2025d)

Both Sisbén and strata classifications are public policy tools to categorize the Colombian population into socioeconomic groups. However, they have different objectives and methodologies. Generally, individuals classified under Sisbén's vulnerable groups were found within the first three strata. This characteristic could explain why, in this study, the strata classification identified more potential beneficiaries compared to those identified by the Sisbén criterion. Ultimately, since candidates can choose which criterion is more favorable to use for receiving free tuition, the actual participation rate of beneficiaries using the Sisbén criterion was higher than that of those using the strata criterion.

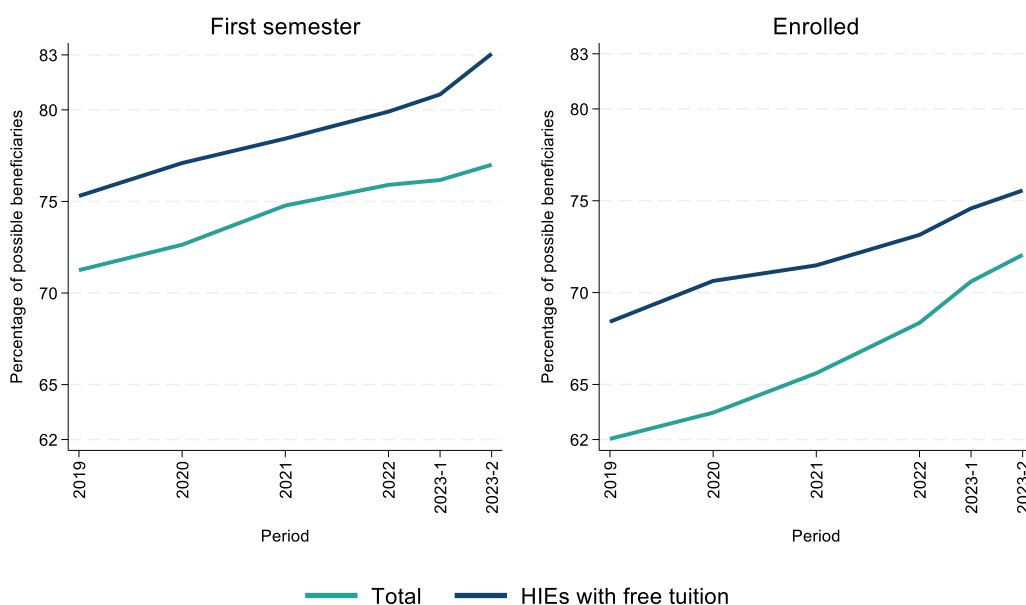


Figure 7. Percentage of Potential Beneficiaries Categorized by Sisbén criterion in HEIs with Free Tuition and in Total HEIs
Source: SPADIES (MEN, 2025d)

Conclusions

This paper explores the changes in enrollment and socioeconomic diversity among students in an undergraduate program in Colombia after the introduction of a free tuition policy for socioeconomically vulnerable populations. The policy was gradually implemented by the Generación E program, which differs from the financial aid programs used previously to promote higher education. Given the support needed to serve the student community during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in the demand for a broad policy to increase access and retention in higher education. In response to this scenario, the Colombian government launched the Matrícula Cero strategy in 2022 to provide free education in public HEIs. Since its inception, the policy has expanded its benefits to additional vulnerable population groups. It also relaxed its requirements for accessing and maintaining its benefits.

This policy aims to promote social equity in higher education as a fundamental right and to create more opportunities for vulnerable populations. Given that the Colombian education service is a mix of public and private institutions, this policy seems to encourage students to choose public HEIs over private ones. This arrangement may account for the increase in the number of students attending public HEIs. As a result, the policy has provided a stable income to support the sustainability of public HEIs (Moreno Rodríguez & Vargas Pardo, 2021), although it also makes them more susceptible to changes in government policies or administration. Still, it is essential to note that the coverage has not yet surpassed the 56% threshold of the undergraduate in-age population.

The policy effectively increased coverage rates in areas with lower population density, where public HEIs were the leading providers. However, in the densely populated Andean region, where there are many private HEIs, the coverage rates of the policy remained low. It is possible that private HEIs could absorb the quotas that public HEIs were unable to accommodate. Additionally, it is crucial to ensure that future policy designs make low-density regions attractive destinations for students to counteract the tendency of students to migrate in search of a greater range of educational options and higher-quality education (Castro Mora & Taborda Moreno, 2021).

The growth of vulnerable populations in higher education continues to increase. Nevertheless, it is essential to analyze the effect of the policy on the permanence and graduation of these beneficiaries. In Colombia, the dropout rate in higher education is approximately 50%. This issue has multiple causes interconnected, with socioeconomic factors being one of the most important, especially when combined with others (Arias et al., 2024). For example, inadequate academic foundations in primary and secondary education may worsen the low persistence rates among socioeconomically vulnerable students.

While the free tuition policy had positively impacted marginalized groups, the percentage of beneficiaries remained low compared to the total population (Quesada Moreno & Leguizamón Campos, 2024). There is still a pressing need for improved recognition and integration mechanisms for ethnic groups, individuals with disabilities, and victims of armed conflict. Complementary policies should encourage diverse perspectives on knowledge, skills, and hiring practices. They should also provide cultural competency training for HEIs' employees and foster engagement with students and the community.

Finally, discussions emerge regarding the availability and centralization of detailed public data to analyze the effectiveness and costs of public policies. This matter can enlighten debates about the accountability of education policies and enhance the design of these policies.

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