

Construction of Equity in Ecuadorian Higher Education Policy Documents

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Equity is considered a key element to ensure universal access to high-quality education and equal treatment in the higher education system. This study investigates the construction of equity in Ecuadorian higher education through two sets of policy documents—higher education and language policies, both relevant in considering the direction and structure of the higher education sector. The coherence or deficiencies in the construction of equity are important for this concept to be exercised and properly enacted. To this end, five national policy documents related to higher education were selected to be analyzed through a critical discourse analysis lens to determine whether the policy documents are framed with a limited or more expansive interpretation in relation to theoretical elements of equity. Critical discourse analysis was chosen as the main analysis tool since it permits the identification and critical examination of similarities and differences in two or more sets of documents. The study identifies autonomy, identity, and equality as prevalent elements of equity in the general laws regulating higher education and the national educational plan, whereas the language policy documents are more focused on competitiveness and elements of globalization. In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of coherence in policy documents to achieve more equitable practices.

Keywords: equity, higher education, policy documents, Ecuador

La equidad se considera un elemento clave para garantizar el acceso universal a una educación de alta calidad y la igualdad de trato en el sistema de educación superior. Este estudio investiga la construcción de equidad en la educación superior ecuatoriana a través de dos grupos de documentos de política pública: educación superior y políticas del lenguaje, ambos relevantes al considerar la dirección y estructura del sector de educación superior. La coherencia o deficiencias en la construcción de equidad son importantes para que este concepto se ejerza y se implemente adecuadamente. Con este fin, se seleccionaron cinco documentos de políticas nacionales relacionados con la educación superior para ser analizados a través de una lente de análisis crítico del discurso para determinar si los documentos de política pública están enmarcados con una interpretación limitada o más amplia en relación con los elementos teóricos de la equidad. Se eligió el análisis crítico del discurso como principal herramienta de análisis ya que permite la identificación y el examen crítico de similitudes y diferencias en dos o más grupos de documentos. El estudio identifica la autonomía, la identidad y la igualdad como elementos prevalentes de equidad en las leyes generales que regulan la educación superior y el plan educativo nacional, mientras que los documentos de política relacionados a la lingüística se centran más en la competitividad y los elementos de la globalización. En conclusión, este estudio destaca la importancia de la coherencia en los documentos de política pública para lograr prácticas más equitativas.

Palabras clave: equidad, educación superior, documentos de política pública, Ecuador

Introduction

The construction of equity in educational policy documents is of great importance to ensure universal and equal educational opportunities and rights and allow citizens to succeed in society. The term “equity” in educational policy immediately raises questions about the redistribution of finite material and human resources (Paquette, 1998). Yet, the definition of equity can be viewed from a deeper perspective that analyzes the social and economic conditions that allow the public to benefit from state provisions (Rizvi, 2010). The construction of equity implies that policy

decisions, in this case within higher education, comprise both fundamental aspects—such as governance and curricula—and fundamental values, such as equality (Rubaii & Bandeira, 2018).

In the 21st century, Latin American countries have engaged in widespread efforts to improve higher education and meet the demands of equity, quality, and relevance for the educational system (Johnson, 2017). All these efforts have required structural change in economies and reforms in social sectors, often supported by international organizations, to help shape policy in higher education systems (Eisemon & Holm-Nielsen, 1995). The attempt to improve equity in education has led governments to implement a range of educational policies, but success has been limited to proposing policy improvement and change, due to policy-setting problems at the national level and the inability of institutions to reach a consensus to further their goals (Schwartzman, 1993).

The Ecuadorian higher education system mirrors those of other countries in Latin America in its many internal and external stresses. The major changes in higher education policy began with the Higher Education Law (LOES, 2010) in 2010, based on the provisions of the 2008 Constitution, which guarantees state-funded education free to all Ecuadorian residents at the point of use and at all levels. Before that, Ecuadorian public universities were tuition-fee-based, which gave them relative autonomy as they were not widely controlled by the government through the state budget, and there was limited external oversight. In fact, universities were able to control their own enrollment policies, budgets, and the hiring of faculty (Schneider et al., 2019). Since the LOES (2010), public universities changed the funding and administrative structure as they became fully dependent on the central government for their budget allocations, student admissions, and administration (Van Hoof et al., 2013). The LOES (2010), based on the Constitution, increased university regulation, enhanced accountability, and brought efforts more in line with the country's development needs (Van Hoof et al., 2013). Consequently, the Ecuadorian higher education sector currently operates within a highly state-regulated environment. Despite the apparently loss of autonomy, the reform of the higher education system has led to efforts to improve quality and standardization of the country's universities and their institutional policies (Benavides et al., 2019).

The higher education reforms were intended to bring about greater equality and quality. Among the changes to the higher education system in Ecuador, the improvement of English-language proficiency was promoted as key. In 2012, the Ministry of Education published a revised National English Curriculum and various related measures, which incorporated a specially framed English component. It was aimed at addressing the imbalance in access to English-language learning in society in general and in specific areas of the private and public sectors, as well as improving the quality of English instruction in public education (British Council, 2015).

This research explores the construction of equity in a selection of five higher education policy documents (organic law and lower-level policies) and determines the extent to which these policies are framed in relation to theoretical elements of equity such as autonomy, identity, and equality. Strong equity constructions are those that consider autonomy in terms of language choice, identity through the expression of character and personality, and the minimization of economic inequality based on these choices (Ricento, 2000). To this end, it was necessary to identify the Ecuadorian government's interpretation of equity in the policy documents to understand whether there are practical deficiencies at a semiotic level that may lead to misinterpretation and an unequal enactment in the educational system. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to examine the documents and provide answers to the following questions.

To what extent do the selected Ecuadorian higher education policy documents reflect equity?

What is the interpretation of equity within the selected policies?

Are there similarities between the interpretations of equity in the Ecuadorian higher education policy documents and the higher-education language policy?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature of the construction of equity in previous studies; section 3 describes and explains the method and procedures used; section 4 presents the results; section 5 discusses the findings and possible future actions to be developed. Finally, in section 6, the conclusions from the research are presented.

Literature Review

This section reviews the importance given to equity in educational policies in a variety of contexts and reports on selected similar studies. The purpose of the review is to understand better the interpretation of equity in policy documents and in academia.

Conceptualization of Equity

The standard definition of “equity” is “the quality of being equal or fair; fairness, impartiality; even-handed” (Stevenson, 2010). Therefore, equity may be thought of as a means of guiding equal and fair actions. It is further defined as “the belief that the distribution of economic welfare matters, and that increasing the equality of distribution is a laudable objective” (Oxford Dictionary of Economics, 2017). This second conceptualization is used in policy documents more frequently than the general idea of equality (Unterhalter, 2009). In addition to these concepts, equity is also viewed as a process or as a product (Crenshaw, 1998; Gutierrez, 2002; Martin, 2003; Rousseau & Tate, 2003 as cited in Jackson et al., 2015). Equity as a process means treating all students equally, while equity as a product means differentiating instruction based on students’ needs to achieve learning outcomes (Jackson et al., 2015). Although a substantial corpus of literature exists on studies of equity, the definition of this term is often vague as its understanding and interpretation depends on both conventional ideology and varied perspectives on the best direction for educational reform (Bulkley, 2013). Within the conventional ideology, equity is the distribution of resources, equal access, and equal opportunity to learn. These concepts are contained within three aspects—inputs, processes, and outcomes. For instance, (McDermott et al., 2013) describes how inputs are combined with classrooms processes to provide students with an opportunity to learn the expected material and skills. Many educational reforms that aim to promote equity are in accordance with one or other of these specific concept considerations.

The conceptualization of equity in education refers to access to good quality education for all the public. It seeks to maximize individual, social, intellectual, cultural, and emotional capacities within a framework of equality of opportunities (de los Santos et al., 2020). Therefore, equality can be considered a principle of equity that refers to having access to the same resources and opportunities to satisfy individual needs (Maguire, 2019). More precisely, equity means a system wherein public resources are redistributed to create school systems that are more likely to be

equal. According to these ideals, the construction of equity in educational policies is a key element in aiming for high-quality, inclusive education, training, and life-long learning and in striving for equal treatment and opportunities in education (Mizala & Romaguera, 2002). It is essential, therefore, to analyze the effect policies and statements have on working practices, authoritative culture, epistemology, educational plan improvement, academic debate, and instructional methods. The analysis of the promotion of equity in educational policies can help determine its aims in the development of higher education and identify explicitly whether equity is established as a main policy goal (Morley, 1997).

When educational inequities are conceptualized as a product of sexism, racism, or other forms of identity discrimination, economic disadvantages become peripheral to the quest for equity in education (Pomeroy, 2020). The author notes that this conceptualization of educational inequality can be misused to draw attention away from the poor distribution of economic resources. Pomeroy also argues that, where the nature of educational inequality is presented merely as an undesirable contemporary issue rather than a product of historical social and economic marginalization, it is more probable that schools are able to deliver educational equity through the effective deployment of school regulations and teaching, since these strategies have some direct influence over student attainment and social justice.

Equity in Higher Education and Language Policy

The promotion of equity in higher education policies can be successful when behavioral change can be manifested through practices associated with fairness and inclusion (Marginson, 2011). For such practices to be evident, institutions require freedom or autonomy to pursue different approaches to the redress of injustice and the enhancement of a broader participation of underrepresented groups. Meanwhile, Marginson also clarifies that addressing equity as fairness does not mean it will be conducted with universal disinterest. To have an inclusive approach, higher education institutions must become instruments for advancing individual and social freedoms as part of an equity strategy.

Equity in language policy is embedded in language ideologies (Zuniga et al., 2018), and such ideologies consider autonomy in terms of language choice and identity in terms of personality and character and believe the elimination of economic inequality is derived from such choices (Ricento, 2000). By contrast,

according to Rizvi, (2010), governments and policymakers continuously redefine equity in language policy. These continuous changes can be oriented to respond to the demands of a globalized world in which economic growth is evolving from state building to the development of citizens' skills and knowledge. Rizvi adds that equity, together with other values such as liberty, security, efficiency, and community, is constantly assembled, organized, and articulated in education policy.

In many countries, the language in the classroom has long been recognized as a central factor in guaranteeing access and educational equity (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014). Some national education authorities acknowledge the effects of language on access and equity, for example, in some Andean countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, where indigenous languages other than Spanish have gained official status as a medium of instruction. At the same time, in contexts in which students are forced to acquire a new language as a medium of instruction, efforts to achieve access and equity can be opaque, suggesting that language policy can become intrusive to individual identity (Ricento, 2000).

Several countries have adopted English as a foreign language (EFL) policies that have resulted in the stratification of language learners by proficiency level, which tends to disfavor low-income students and indigenous groups (Montrul, 2009). In a similar vein, some scholars have advised that the use of English language as a medium of instruction in foreign contexts can help reinforce an unequal division of power and resources between groups defined based on language knowledge. EFL policies often respond to economic interests through the commercialization of language teaching around the world (Rizvi, 2010). On the other hand, international conferences and huge investments in both language teaching and teacher education cast English language learning as essential for the development of countries with low incomes (Murray, 2018). Although there is not enough evidence that learning English is fundamentally linked to helping individuals out of poverty or to increasing the participation of a country in the global economy, many developing countries have adopted the learning of English as mandatory through their language policies (McArthur, 2016; Murray, 2018; Zuniga et al., 2018). Therefore, language policy represents a multilayered process influenced by local and global discourse around language, identity, and ideology.

This literature review shows that the different interpretations of the term “equity” can affect the enactment of a policy, and its misinterpretation may favor market forces and downplay elements of equity. Therefore, there is a clear need for research that investigates the construction of equity in educational policies. The current study also contributes to a better understanding of the interpretation of equity in higher education policies within the Ecuadorian context, on which there are a limited number of studies. A critical analysis of the construction of equity in higher education policy documents is a novel approach, and the findings will help guide decisions in future policy making.

Methods

To provide a methodological approach for the study, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used. CDA is a qualitative analytical approach centered on socio-political control, which incorporates issues of social changes, power abuse, philosophical burden, and social injustice by critically examining language as a social action (Bhatia, 2008). Therefore, the analysis of discourse gives insight into social issues as they are framed in language. Within CDA, language is socially shaped in discourse, and its analysis has become important to see how it is used at the individual and community levels in which power is manifested (Fairclough, 2013). CDA aims to reveal the structures of power and ideology behind discourse by analyzing not only what is said or written but also what is hidden or absent in challenging inequality, injustice, unfairness, and the lack of democracy in society (Al Ghazali, 2017; Rogers, 2011). CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that opens dialogue between areas concerned with linguistic and semiotic analysis and fields concerned with researching social processes and social change (Taylor, 2004).

Given the aims of CDA, this approach is appropriate for exploring policy texts and encourages researchers to develop a fuller picture of policy effects since CDA enables the combination of linguistic and social analysis from a critical point of view (Taylor, 2004). A number of different CDA approaches draw significantly on the work of Foucault (see Van Dijk, 1993, Wodak & Meyer, 2009 as cited in Pomeroy, 2020), particularly in terms of how they theorize power, society, discourse, and critique. Since this study addresses a gap in the construction of equity in the Ecuadorian higher education policy, a general analytical framework is used for CDA,

which allows for a full exploration of the construction of equity in higher education policy.

A General Framework for CDA

CDA is a useful tool for policy analysis due to its combination of linguistic analysis and social analysis, which allows it to provide a framework for researchers to go beyond speculation and demonstrate how policy text works (Taylor, 2004). It is critical as it attempts to reveal social problems by analyzing their sources, causes, and resistances (Rogers, 2011). According to Fairclough (2013), CDA focuses on social problems in their semiotic aspects, constructs objects of research, analyzes texts from a linguistic and interdiscursive perspective, and identifies possible ways to overcome obstacles by moving the analysis from negative to positive critique.

Based on Fairclough's framework, other academics have adapted CDA to diverse research strategies that share general characteristics and emphasize the use of linguistics. One such strategy is the general analytical framework, which proposes a series of methodological steps designed for flexibility and simplicity and condenses many CDA approaches into a set of easily conceptualized levels of analysis (Mullet, 2018). This study used the general framework to conduct the CDA.

Mullet (2018) explains CDA through a seven-step process that was followed in this research:

Stage 1: Select the discourse

Inequity in higher education policy documents.

Stage 2: Locate and prepare data sources (texts)

Data sources were gathered from government official web pages, as explained below in the selection of data.

Stage 3: Explore the background and producers of the text.

The papers selected for analysis were national policies whose purpose is to regulate and guarantee the right to high-quality higher education. The Ecuadorian higher education policies follow the mandates of the 2008 Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador. Below, this article relates the details of the policies that were analyzed.

Stage 4: Code the texts and identify overarching themes

Careful reading of the selected documents allowed for the identification of the themes of autonomy, equality, identity, knowledge production, English as a requirement for graduation, and English as a requirement for global competence.

Stage 5: Analyze the external relationships in the texts (interdiscursivity)

The interdiscursive analysis attempted to determine how two or more texts operate as genre. The following questions were used to identify the external relations in the texts. What is the relationship between the texts? To what extent are the texts similar or different? Do the texts enable the maintenance of a particular discourse?

Stage 6: Analyze the internal relationships in the text

A linguistic analysis was developed to identify how vocabulary and grammar create meaning. This study used the following questions to guide this analysis. What experiential, relational, or expressive value do words have? What types of verb tenses are used? Are sentences positive or negative? Are nominalizations of verbs used? Is there a declarative or imperative mode in the grammar structure?

Stage 7: Interpret the data

The interpretation of meanings was organized in relation to the major themes found in the documents.

Data

This article considered higher education policy documents produced by the Ecuadorian government as the object of research. The selection of the documents was guided by the purpose of regulating the process of Ecuadorian higher education. According to Johnson (2011), a policy text is a social act, a product of the socio-political and historical context in which it exists. A policy document describes a problem in the public domain and recommends a particular course of action. In this way, the selected policy documents provided a unique source for analysis as their discourse announces a plan of action for the improvement of quality and equity in the higher education system. The policy documents were collected from official government websites, and the extracts taken from the document policies are all related to equity and language education. They were translated from Spanish to English and were reproduced without any further alteration from the original source. The following papers were included in this study.

The Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES, 2010): This law regulates the higher education system in the country through the entities and institutions that comprise it; it determines the rights, duties, and obligations of individuals and organizations and establishes sanctions for noncompliance with the provisions contained in the constitution and the law.

The Organic Law of Reform of the LOES (2018): This law enacts reforms that were made to the original law.

2017–2021 National Development Plan (2017): The National Development Plan (2017) is the instrument that governs public policies, programs, and projects, including the programming and implementation of the state budget. This document also contains the educational goals and strategies planned by the government.

National Academic Regime (2020): The academic regime regulates how programs and courses are related to society, considering the characteristics of the institutions of higher education; their degrees and programs; and national, regional and local needs.

The National Curriculum Guidelines for English as a Foreign Language (Ministerio de Educación, 2014): The aim of these curriculum guidelines is to support and guide English teaching and learning processes.

The documents were studied in depth, with special attention paid to the sections related to concepts of equity and language, from which salient texts were selected for analysis. Through the inductive coding procedure, the themes of autonomy, equality, identity, knowledge production, English as a requirement for graduation, and English as a requirement for global competence were identified. The analysis was carried out manually, and the findings reported below emerged from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent to the raw data (Thomas, 2006).

Results

The following themes emerged from the policy document extracts selected according to the purpose of the study and the specific research questions. After determining the themes, the extracts from the selected texts were analyzed interdiscursively and linguistically.

Elements of equity

The study identifies autonomy, identity, and equality as prevalent aspects of equity mentioned in the analyzed Ecuadorian general laws regulating higher education and the national educational plan, whereas the language policy documents are more focused on competitiveness and elements of globalization. As texts taken from the analyzed policy documents show, the constructs of autonomy, identity, and equality are prevalent in the section on equity, which is one of the principles mentioned in the policy documents.

Autonomy.

Organic Law (2010, 2018)

Art. 8.-Purposes of Higher Education

(b) Strengthen a reflective spirit in the students, oriented toward the achievement of personal autonomy within a framework of freedom of thought and ideological pluralism.

Art. 17.- Recognition of responsible autonomy

The state recognizes the academic, administrative, financial, and organic autonomy of universities and polytechnic schools in accordance with the principles established in the Constitution of the Republic.

Extract (b) establishes one of the purposes of higher education and sets a tone of freedom that contrasts with one of the theoretical aspects of equity. The concept of autonomy is mentioned as a goal that individuals must reach in their way of thinking by accepting diversity and the need to break with oppressive ideals (Ricento, 2000). The sentence is cast in the imperative, expressing a command to be followed in relation to the individuals' autonomy.

In the second extract, Art. 17, the concept of autonomy is understood to be the independent allocation of funds and the free administration of economic resources by the institutions. This statement reflects a conventional interpretation of equity (Paquette, 1998). The sentence is in the declarative mode in the present tense, suggesting immediate change in concordance with the major law.

Equality.

2017–2021 National Development Plan (2017)

Art. 2.- Quality and Inclusion: Expanding Opportunities in Education

To guarantee the right to free education up to the graduate level, this intervention supports equitable access to higher education and enhances technical and technological training, articulated through the productive needs of the country, as well as through the projection of future development to provide the best opportunities to young Ecuadorians.

The extract from Art. 2 mentions quality and inclusion as elements of equity and explains that the purpose of free education is to respond to societal needs and expectations (de los Santos et al., 2020). This paragraph sets a tone of

instrumentation as it suggests that technology is a means to competitiveness that will guarantee a promising future for later generations (Murray, 2018). The paragraph states that everyone has the right to equitable treatment and opportunities for education. In terms of linguistic analysis, it is a persuasive paragraph that presents a series of declarative statements communicating a general truth in the Ecuadorian context.

Identity.

Organic Law (2010, 2018)

Art. 8.- Purposes of Higher Education

(c) Contribute to the knowledge, preservation, and enrichment of ancestral knowledge and national culture.

(k) Develop, strengthen, and promote the bilingual and intercultural higher education system, with criteria of quality and in accordance with cultural diversity.

(l) Strengthen the use of ancestral languages and cultural expressions in the different fields of knowledge

2017–2021 National Development Plan (2017)

Art. 2.5.- Guarantee the preservation of traditional languages, multilingualism, and the maintenance of intercultural education systems and the knowledge of diversity.

Extract (c) recognizes the existence of traditional practices as part of the national culture and seeks to ensure the preservation and improvement of ancestral knowledge. In extracts (k) and (l), the premise of defending and strengthening indigenous communities is set as a key goal while the diversity of traditional languages is preserved. The inclusion of traditional culture and language in all disciplines is guaranteed. The discourse is linked to identity as part of language ideology (Ricento, 2000). Yet, the choice of identity categories may be problematic as they attribute false distinctions between peoples. The statements are cast in the imperative and the affirmative. Again, imperative and affirmative sentences show an interpretation of command and general truth.

Knowledge production.

Organic Law (2010, 2018)

Art. 8.- Purposes of Higher Education

(a) Contribute to the development of universal thought, the deployment of scientific production, the arts and culture, and the promotion of technological transfers and innovations.

b) Contribute to the knowledge, preservation, and enrichment of ancestral knowledge and national culture.

Extracts (a) and (b) refer to the contribution of knowledge through the diffusion of elements of globalization, which is represented as inevitable (Rizvi, 2010). Extract (a) points to education and technological progress as essential to the sustainable development of science, arts and culture. Extract (b) addresses the importance of preserving and conserving traditional knowledge for the redress of inequalities. The extracts are structured as imperative statements.

A foreign language as a requirement for graduation.

Article 80.- Learning a second language

Learning a second language will be a requirement for graduation in bachelor's degrees, in accordance with the following proficiency levels, taking as a reference the Common European Framework for languages (National Academic Regime, 2020).

For students enrolled in a program to meet the *requirement* of proficiency in a foreign language, higher education institutions (HEIs), if so required, may enter into agreements with other HEIs or institutions that, although not part of the Higher Education System, offer language programs or courses, provided that they issue certificates of proficiency by administering internationally recognized exams (National Academic Regime, 2020).

The National Academic Regime, which regulates the higher education programs, mentions in Art. 80 the need to attain a certain proficiency level in a second language as a requirement for graduation. Yet, in the second paragraph, it specifies that the foreign language proficiency must be certified through an international exam. This is an example of instrumentation in educational policies as achievement is determined through testing (Maguire, 2019), and structures of power are manifested through discourse (Fairclough, 2013). In terms of linguistic analysis, the first paragraph uses a declarative statement to set a future goal indicated by the use of "will" in the first line. This construction contrasts with the use of the present

tense in the statements following. In the second paragraph, the word “requirement” is emphasized to signal what is important for the present and future.

English—a Requirement for Global Competence.

The following extracts were taken from the National Curriculum Guidelines for English as a Foreign Language (Ministerio de Educación, 2014).

English is unquestionably the world’s lingua franca at present. Not only is much of our technological, scientific, academic, and social information written in English, but also learning and speaking more than one foreign language is essential to interact and communicate in today’s globalized world.

Therefore, current education has the challenge of contributing to the development of students’ skills (a) to live together in their local communities, and (b) to take a more proactive role as world citizens.

To face such challenges, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education (MinEduc) acknowledges the following three key issues:

- a) The importance of the English language as a tool which equips individuals to understand people and cultures beyond linguistic and geographic boundaries.
- b) The need to align the English curriculum to standards such as the Common European Framework of Reference for learning, teaching, and assessment (CEFR)—which is internationally recognized and provides a common basis for the elaboration of language curriculum guidelines and syllabi; and
- c) The Communicative Approach is currently the most recognized, accepted norm in the field of language teaching and learning worldwide because it comprises a theoretically well-informed set of principles about the nature of language and of language learning and teaching.

This extracts illustrates that the general linguistic goal of the Ministry of Education is to expand the knowledge of the English language. The first paragraph is an introduction that characterizes English as a tool of access for communication around the world (Rizvi, 2010). The second paragraph uses a problem–solution structure in which the problem is the “challenge of developing the students’ skills,” and the solutions are summarized in extracts (a), (b) and (c). The three extracts construe globalization as categorically true. Extract (a) refers to English as tool of understanding without limitations. Extract (b) suggests the need for an English curriculum within the worldwide standard of the Common European Framework.

Extract (c) establishes the Communicative Approach as the worldwide standard for teaching and learning the English language. All the selected extracts are cast as declarative statements.

Discussion

This study examines the construction of equity in the selected higher education policy documents from Ecuador, using CDA as the method of analysis and interpretation. The elements of equity have been written in the policy documents analyzed through the selected approach. The main findings of this study were used to answer the established research questions, as follows.

Research Question 1: To what extent do the policy documents reflect equity?

The texts analyzed from the selected policy documents encapsulate the meaning of equity within the narrow tenets of social efficiency. The National Academic Regime (2020) and the National Curriculum of English as a Foreign Language (2014) showed a degree of favoritism toward language instrumentation and marketization as a process of interaction and integration in the educational system. Although the Higher Education Law stipulates the need for the practice of equity in the educational system, these specific regulations show a focus concerned more with the production of knowledge from the perspective of access to a competitive world.

According to the LOES (2010), the reformed Organic Law (LOES, 2018), and the 2017–2021 National Development Plan (2017), equity is a priority theme in the government's higher education agenda that seeks better opportunities for professional success. Although the general policy documents specify the aim of equity, the lower-level policies do not spell out clear equity promotion strategies to encourage the inclusion of students in vulnerable conditions in a system of widening participation. According to Rizvi (2010) such is a weak approach to equity, one that pays lip service to the concept but fails to enact it.

Research question 2: What is the interpretation of equity within the selected policies?

The themes related to equity that emerged from the policy documents entailed autonomy, equality, and identity. The concept of autonomy encapsulates two dimensions in the LOES (2010). The first refers to personal autonomy through freedom of thought and the recognition of different cultural backgrounds. The second

concept refers to the responsibility that universities have in managing their resources in response to societal needs. Universities need a degree of autonomy to fulfil their functions, yet autonomy is never absolute and complete as a balance between leadership and faculty is always necessary (Keddie, 2016). Therefore, the market ideologies driving autonomous institutionalism tend to promote social segregation and stratification, which amplifies the gap between privileged and less-privileged universities (Lamb, 2007, as cited in Keddie, 2016).

The second theme to emerge from the analysis is the value of equality of access to high-quality and inclusive education. The emphasis on freedom and equality is a liberal social value related to diversity, tolerance, and respect for individuals and their personal autonomy, which needs to be considered in educational policies that seek to transform institutions (Zine, 2001). In this regard, the Organic Law (2010) and the 2017–2021 National Development Plan (2017) promote respect for diversity as one of the fundamental values of society; these documents presuppose that the only way to achieve equity is through the participation of all stakeholders in the educational system. Meanwhile, the language policy documents are focused on raising the quality of education by requiring the learning of English language as a means of inclusion in a globalized world and as an important tool for knowledge production.

The third theme to be identified is the value of identity. The Organic Law (LOES, 2010) and the 2017–2021 National Development Plan (2017) guarantee the preservation of ancestral knowledge, culture, and traditional languages. Here, the higher education system clearly promotes respect for diversity and the conservation and use of ancestral languages and other cultural expressions. Yet, regarding the promotion of ancestral languages, the aim seems to come into conflict with the learning of a foreign language, specifically English, as a graduation requirement set by the National Academic Regime (2020).

Research question 3: Are there similarities between the interpretations of equity in the policy documents and the language policy?

The language policy documents are limited to a discourse that refers to English as a tool for competitiveness in a globalized world and as a graduation requirement. English-language learning is seen as a pertinent, highly valued skill, whereas the promotion of ancestral languages is viewed as a matter of conservation rather than

growth. This situation could place ethnic groups in a position of disadvantage. Moreover, setting a foreign language as a graduation requirement and establishing general guidelines for English as a foreign language for communicating with the world limits rather than expands student choice and has consequences for the concept of autonomy.

Conclusion

This study focused on the construction of equity in higher education policy documents. While there is much research on equity in education in different contexts, little has been done on equity in Ecuadorian higher education. The use of CDA provided a tool for determining whether the selected policy documents are framed with a limited or more expansive interpretation in relation to the key elements of equity—autonomy, identity, and equality. Following the analysis, the interpretation of equity in the selected policy documents is limited to the narrow tenets of social efficiency.

The Organic Law (LOES, 2010) and the Reformed Organic Law (LOES, 2018) maintain the same discourse in relation to equity, with no change in declared intention or tone. There is also alignment between the Organic Law (LOES, 2010, 2018) and the National Development Plan (2017), but the extracts related to language policy taken from the National Academic Regime (2020) and the National Curriculum Guidelines for English as a Foreign Language (Ministerio de Educación, 2014) are not directly related to what is stipulated in the general laws. The discourse of marketization and instrumentation identified in the language policy have resulted in a weak formulation of equity that has left questions of identity unanswered.

Further research should be focused on the construction of equity in higher education policies to determine their true intentions regarding fairness and inclusion that are necessary to guarantee the quality of education.

About the Author

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