

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18764/2178-2229v32n3e26127>

Public policies for university financing in Argentina

Marcelo Fabián Vitarelli

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9141-5735>

Alicia Eugenia Olmos

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1303-3752>

Abstract: The main objective of this article is to analyze public policies on university financing in Argentina over the last decade, focusing on their impact on access, retention, and quality in higher education. The research adopts a historical-descriptive methodology that combines a comparative analysis of primary enrollment and scholarship data from two public universities in the Nuevo Cuyo region with a qualitative review of national programs and policies aimed at quality assurance and strengthening teaching staff. The findings reveal a steady increase in university enrollment, driven by the creation of new institutions and programs that expanded territorial coverage and enabled access for first-generation university students. Student scholarships, both national and institutional, emerge as key mechanisms to support students from vulnerable contexts, although their budgetary weight remains limited compared to actual needs. Additionally, special funding programs for teaching positions have strengthened academic supply and responded to the challenges of the first years of study. In conclusion, the decade under review can be regarded as a period of significant progress towards inclusion and educational equity. Public financing reaffirmed the Argentine university's role as a social right and as a driver of regional and cultural development.

Keywords: higher education; teaching financing; university financing; public policies.

1 Introduction

Education in general, and higher education in particular, are essential instruments for successfully facing the challenges of the modern world and for training citizens capable of building a more just and open society, based on solidarity, respect for human rights, and the shared use of knowledge and information. Higher education constitutes, at the same time, an irreplaceable element for social development, production, economic growth, the strengthening of cultural identity, the maintenance of social cohesion, the fight against poverty, and the promotion of a culture of peace. (UNESCO, 1996).

This historical-descriptive work aims to account for public policies in higher education in Argentina over the last decade within the framework of access, retention, and state mechanisms for young people to access higher education. The focus is placed on the ways in which policy finances the system to achieve its purpose and account for the assurance of higher education.

Higher education in Argentina, as is also the case for compulsory education.¹, is of a centenary character, of a public, secular and free nature. This implies that the university system is sustained by taxpayers' payments to the State ² derived from different public treasury mechanisms. The institutions are distributed throughout the national territory in more than 60 universities, some with a long trajectory and others of recent creation and consolidation.

According to Buchbinder (2020), the historicity of access to higher education has been growing during the 20th century with various movements promoted by governments, particularly highlighting recent decades in which public policy has deployed specific strategies with the operation of focused programs within the framework of educational inclusion framed in criteria toward the construction of a state policy (Morduchowich, 2004). It should be clarified that the financing of education until the 2000s meant in Argentina the exercise of government policies, but not state policies, a differentiation that very few make in the field of educational financing (Vitarelli; Wogning, 2010). That is, the various governments that succeeded one another during the 20th century marked their priorities according to the governing ideology and their government plans. Only in 2006 did the country regulate this practice with the national ruling of Law No. 26,075 (2005), which deals with educational financing, which currently only covers compulsory education, leaving higher education outside of it.³ It is the first time that Argentina has stipulated by law the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) allocated to the education sector (Vitarelli, 2010).

The allocation of public university budget shows the existence of certain social, gender, and geographical discriminations, but a tendency toward equalization if the historical trend is considered. If one looks at the glass half full, it is observed that there is increasing participation of lower-income students in an increasingly inclusive system, that women are even the majority

¹ Law 1420 of Common Education was enacted on July 8, 1884, during the government of Julio Argentino Roca. This law established free, compulsory, and secular primary education in Argentina and marked a course as a public education system.

² The regulation states that "the National State is responsible for providing funding, supervision and oversight of National Universities, as well as supervision and oversight of Private Universities," and also assigns the non-delegable responsibility of guaranteeing equal opportunities and access, retention and graduation, and promoting inclusion policies with a gender perspective within the framework of Latin American integration." Article 2 of the amended LES supports the process of advancement in guaranteeing higher education as a universal right that has been taking place in the country's public university system. This represents a historic vindication of the student movement and university collectives throughout the country.

³ The initiative establishes that 6.5% of GDP will be allocated to coverage from 45 days to 3 years, compulsory education and higher education for teacher training, and the remaining 1.5% to university education.

among students and teachers, and that institutions exist throughout the country. On the other hand, the glass half empty indicates that participation of upper strata among enrollees continues to be higher, that women remain underrepresented in the highest positions at universities, and that in peripheral provinces there is less educational offering, especially of private universities. In this sense, state action through free education and financing of universities throughout the country has been, and will continue to be, fundamental for reducing or eliminating the various discriminations in the university sphere⁴ (Doberti; Gabau; Levi, 2020, p. 44).

Next, we will take as analysis cases two public universities from the Centro Cuyo region to frame them as witness cases and be able to analyze in them the behavior of some indicators that we will present. We will make reference to the National University of San Luis (UNSL), an institution with fifty years of trajectory that develops undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, research, extension and internationalization programs. The other educational institution that we will look at is the National University of Villa Mercedes (UNViMe), a young university with only fifteen years of existence that is beginning to systematically develop its substantive functions.

2 Focused public financing policies: university enrollment

The Argentine university, in the second half of the 20th century, experienced a sustained increase in enrollment admission. This growth deepened after the return to democracy, for various reasons that have been analyzed from historical and epistemological perspectives (De Luca; Álvarez Prieto, 2013).

First, the democratic reopening drove a large part of students toward higher education. More than 50% oriented themselves toward careers in social sciences, humanities, and teacher training for compulsory educational levels. Many of these had been closed during the military dictatorship for ideological reasons.

Second, since the 1990s, new public universities were created, especially in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area and also in interior provinces, as in the case of UNViMe. These institutions sought to serve populations that previously could not access the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) or other university centers, thus reducing historical inequalities in access.

Finally, from 2010 onward, the transition rate from secondary school to university increased considerably. This was made possible thanks to focused ministerial programs that strengthened university articulation. As a result, public

⁴ This citation, as well as all the others in this document, were translated from Spanish to English.

universities received the first generation of university students in many families, a historic fact in Argentina.

These factors express the current dynamics of higher education in the territory (Vitarelli, 2023).

The implementation of a series of policies such as the modification of the National Education Law (through the enactment of Law No. 27,045), which declares education compulsory for four-year-old children, the enactment of laws for the Creation and Operation of Student Centers (No. 26,877) and the Effective Implementation of State Responsibility at the Higher Education Level (No. 27,204), which establishes free and unrestricted access to state undergraduate studies and prohibits eliminatory examinations and fee charging, one of the most marked characteristics of this period is given by the expansion in the number of national public institutions, which went from 38 to 54. Framed in a different political context, a similar process took place in the mid-1990s, and another in the early years of the 1970s. In all cases, the objectives of the implemented policies aimed not only to expand the offering of careers and thus sustain enrollment expansion, but also to reduce dropout rates, redistribute part of the enrollment toward areas considered priority, and increase graduation rates (Mendonça, 2020, p. 2).

For the case that concerns us, that of the Nuevo Cuyo Region, formed by one of the seven Regional Councils for Higher Education Planning (CPRES)⁵ of Argentina, it is composed of universities located in the Provinces of La Rioja, Mendoza, San Juan and San Luis. Law 24,521/95 on Higher Education introduces a new actor in the governance of the educational system. The National Planning Council for Higher Education (CPRES) is conceived as an intermediate-level actor with capacity for the elaboration and implementation of educational policies. It is created to plan, coordinate and regulate the comprehensive work of the higher education system. However, "currently it seems to fulfill other functions different from those defined in the norm that gives it origin" (Gisele Gonzalez, 2011, p. 43). It should be noted that the province of San Luis, with the smallest number of inhabitants in the federal geopolitical region to which it belongs, the center of Argentina, according to the 2022 Census, recent National Population and Housing Census: San Luis has a total of 542,069 inhabitants, and currently has three national universities. Historically, for more than fifty years, the only national university was the National University of San Luis whose history depends on its creation from the National University of Cuyo, with campuses currently in both the cities of Villa Mercedes and Merlo, where two other national universities are

⁵ Created by MEYD Resolution No. 280/16, the CPRES are spaces designed to bring together higher education actors, including national and private universities and national and provincial governments, with the objective of planning and developing higher education at the regional level.

located: the National University of Villa Mercedes and the recently created National University of los Comechingones. Part of this description marks one of the many data points that accounts for the recent institutional evolution and diversification as well as its impact on the treatment of the student enrollment in the region, accounting for higher education dynamics characteristic of the times we live in, as can be verified in the Synthesis of University Statistical Information (2021-2022).

Next, we present a descriptive statistical series of the behavior of student enrollment at UNViMe over the last five years.

Table 1 – UNVIME student enrollment by school and total. Period 2020 to 2024

UNViMe Student Enrollment. Period 2020 to 2024					
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
School of Health Sciences	1374	1867	2223	2093	2031
School of Social Sciences and Education	397	456	485	437	582
School of Business Management and Economics	371	411	409	456	535
School of Engineering and Environmental Sciences	442	553	666	789	756
Total	2584	3287	3793	3775	3904
Enrollment Increase Percentage	51.1%				

Source: author's elaboration based on Statistics from the National University of Villa Mercedes provided in UNVIME Transparency⁶.

Some interpretive keys to the behavior of university enrollment at UNVIME based on the data provided:

- 1) In five years of annual student enrollment in UNVIME programs, enrollment has grown by 1,008 students with young people primarily from the cities of Villa Mercedes and Justo Daract;
- 2) The enrollment currently includes all eighteen undergraduate and graduate programs offered by the institution's academic offerings;
- 3) UNViMe has a single master's degree program in University Teaching in agreement with the Federation of University Teachers (FEDUN), but statistical data is not yet available given its recent start in the second semester of 2024 regarding enrollment data;
- 4) The year-over-year growth for the School of Social Sciences and Education based in Justo Daract reflects the graduation data from the Technical Degree in Administration and University Management (TAGU), the only technical program of the

⁶ More information can be found in the institutional space that addresses the topic:
<https://www.unvime.edu.ar/transparencia/>

School, the implementation of early childhood and primary education teaching programs, and the recent opening of the classroom extension in the city of Tilisarao through an agreement with the Municipality for offering the early childhood education teaching program, with plans for 2025 to open the classroom extension in Unión with the primary education teaching program;

5) The growth for the School of Health Sciences is relevant data derived from the development and implementation of the nursing program and other health field programs that make up the School—priority programs during and after the pandemic for the health of Argentina's population—and the regular opening of the Medicine program, a program with enrollment limits at UNViMe;

6) It should be noted that by virtue of the institutional project, UNVIME is currently working on creating classroom extensions in different parts of the provincial territory. The classroom extensions emerge as concrete responses to the demands of municipalities that sign agreements with the institution for offering fixed-term programs, such as in the localities of Tilisarao, Unión, Naschel, and San Francisco, once again ensuring that youth do not migrate from the provincial territory and can access higher education.

These briefly presented data reflect exponential growth in the territories reached by UNViMe, meaning that young people no longer move to other university centers outside San Luis to pursue their higher education, thus taking advantage of the varied local offering of degrees and professions available. This contributes to the productive economic development of the region, accounting for socio-economic dynamics. Similarly, the behavior of student enrollment attempts to contextualize the implementation of a sectoral government policy centered on the student and their local needs, which implies a financial effort to support regional economic, productive, cultural and educational development where the young university deploys its actions (Vitarelli, 2008). We are witnessing the implementation of new dynamics of higher education in territories with strong sectoral implications in a new millennium traversed by a political economy that marks an arc from the local to the internationalization of public universities in Argentina (Vitarelli, 2004).

UNSL, a consolidated university with more than fifty years of history, does not present statistical significance that demonstrates stagnation in its descriptive metrics. On the contrary, it highlights the increase in enrollment since 2019, currently exceeding

20,000 undergraduate and graduate students (UNSL, 2023, p. 5). This growth reflects the institution's capacity to attract students, sustained by a broad academic offering: more than 70 undergraduate and pre-undergraduate programs and more than 50 graduate programs, distributed among the campuses in San Luis (capital), Villa Mercedes and Merlo.

Table 2 – UNSL student enrollment. Period 2019 to 2023

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Enrollment	16112	16725	19911	s/d	20104

Source: author's elaboration based on data published in the UNSL Annual Statistical Synthesis.

Another relevant aspect is the sociological composition of the student population. Approximately 50% of students work to pay for their studies, which highlights the interaction between contemporary socioeconomic reality and the student profile. The predominant age group, between 21 and 29 years, corresponds to the largest population segment of the university, according to the data.

These elements are crucial for the debate on higher education financing in Argentina. UNSL exemplifies an institution that, despite economic challenges, maintains growth and accessibility, serving a diverse population. The analysis of this data suggests the need for financial support policies that consider both the increase in demand and the socioeconomic conditions of students, especially those who combine work and study. In this sense, the UNSL case offers valuable reflections for formulating strategies that strengthen the Argentine public university system. Some interpretive keys to understand what has been said:

- In the case of UNSL, we find ourselves with a consolidated university that is more than fifty years old; the descriptive statistics do not demonstrate this by showing significance;
- It is motivating to review the enrollment increase data from 2019 to present, achieving more than 20,000 students;
- It should be noted that UNSL's academic offering, given its historical trajectory, is very broad: more than 70 undergraduate and graduate programs and more than 50 postgraduate programs, distributed across the capital campus, the city of Villa Mercedes, and the city of Merlo;

- A significant piece of data from the statistics is that almost 50% of its students work to support themselves in their studies, which speaks to the sociology of the student population alongside contemporary socioeconomic reality;
- The largest age population segment of students is between 21 and 29 years old.

However, some conclusive data from both universities in relation to enrollment follows:

1) The academic offering is distributed in the capital city, the city of Villa Mercedes, the city of Justo Daract, and the city of Merlo, plus classroom extensions that are variable according to the needs of municipalities both in the south (Unión) and in the provincial north (San Francisco). For the descriptive sequence presented in both free public universities, this accounts for coverage of almost 90% of the territory of San Luis province, encompassing a large part of it with a total enrollment of about 25,000 students in academic program development.

2) The passage of time in relation to the last ten years has constituted a varied reality that encompasses almost 90% of the disciplinary fields of coverage in scientific and technological development: social sciences, humanities, education, health sciences, engineering, medicine, and the emergence of complex contemporary professions such as molecular biology, nanotechnology, agri-foods, communication design, sports marketing, and other spaces that expand the horizons in which young people can access within the same territory where they live.

3) Having taken two universities as analysis cases, one young and another with trajectory, we can affirm the student behavior that accounts for how the public, free access and free character enables youth generations to access higher education, allowing more than 50% of them to be first-generation university students. These movements, as we said previously, are covered by a national state budget that allocates year by year according to the chambers, deputies and senators, an amount of GDP dedicated to sustaining higher education as a government matter.

4) Finally, we will say that both universities contribute to thinking about research and university extension with enclaves in the territories, enabling projects of regional interest, some of them inserted at a global level, and in the case of university extension, attempting to account for the local needs of the actors involved. Research and

extension enable young people to make contact with other universes that complement their academic undergraduate training.

3 Compensatory Policies: student scholarships

Up to this point, we have accounted for how student enrollment behaves as a case study in two Argentine universities and thereby briefly explained the dynamics that occur. It is now our turn to look at and address how these students remain in light of the social needs of the populations of origin to which they belong, hence we will talk a bit about student scholarships to try to understand their existence and behavior.

It is known that the student enters the university, but now we must ask ourselves some initial questions such as: who is the incoming student?, where does the incoming student come from?, what is the socio-cultural reality to which the student entering public university belongs?, is there a unique cultural capital among young people?, how does the university work to provide possible responses to the diversity among subjects? And we can continue enumerating issues, but not before clarifying some criteria that we consider enlightening when thinking about this reality for retention.

The first thing to note is that free tuition and unrestricted access to university do not, by themselves, guarantee student retention. In the academic world, an almost magical social representation usually operates: it is assumed that free tuition automatically resolves the problem of educational gaps. However, first-year dropout rates show that this does not always occur.

Among the factors that affect retention, the following can be mentioned: the low number of young people who effectively transition from high school to university; adaptation difficulties to the first year of academic life; the learning level with which incoming students arrive; the sociocultural capital of their territories of origin; the material conditions of their homes; and the tensions between everyday knowledge and academic knowledge.

These and other elements—which would be extensive to detail here—show that retention does not depend solely on the financing of studies. It is traversed by multiple contextual variables, which are often not contemplated in the first-year university experience.

All this process of increasing massification will take place in the context of university institutions that already currently present serious difficulties in

managing to retain and graduate their students, especially those with less economic and cultural capital. The challenge at present, with a view to solving some of these problems that, without changes, will worsen in the future, is to formulate public and institutional policies that seek to raise graduation rates, within a framework of quality and social inclusion (Fanelli, 2017, p. 1)

This is why we observe in the recent decade the emergence of so-called compensatory policies as part of a state policy that attempts to operate on the inequity of the system seeking to generate conditions for educational equality. For this, the Nation and Universities in particular allocate part of their annual budget granting new possibilities. We look at students from more vulnerable sectors, attempting in our case to reduce educational abandonment and inequalities and promoting capacities in students within the framework of educational equity. These policies are not remedial actions, they do not make the problem disappear, they only attempt to help alleviate situations observed in the witness population trying to generate conditions for dialogue between diverse cultural capitals, bridging the detected gaps about which we have previously questioned.

These sectoral policies belong to national programs with their own financing that have been implemented, but it is also the universities in particular that develop considerable efforts with their own budgets, attending in a focused manner to the student they receive. One of the flagship programs is the Progresar Scholarships⁷ which has been operating for ten years and is present in the national administration of public universities, along with another program which is the Manuel Belgrano scholarships.⁸

The Progresar Program has experienced a very significant expansion in its coverage. In 2014 the total number of beneficiaries was 561,343, approximately 29.7% (167 thousand) were allocated to university students (Lombardía, 2018). In 2018, after having grown above one million beneficiaries in 2017, coverage decreased, dropping to 578,263 beneficiaries, 208,125 corresponding to university students (Social Programs Evaluation and Monitoring System- SIEMPRO, 2018). In 2021, young people aged 16 and 17 were incorporated into the target population within the line that finances compulsory education. In total, the beneficiaries of Progresar scholarships in 2021 were 1,369,825 people, with the university sector

⁷ Decree of Need and Urgency No. 84 of January 23, 2014, created the "PROGRAM TO SUPPORT ARGENTINE STUDENTS" (PROGRESAR) with the purpose of generating new opportunities for social and labor inclusion for young people in vulnerable situations through integrated actions that allow their training and job insertion.

<https://www.argentina.gob.ar/normativa/nacional/resoluci%C3%B3n-138-2018-306484/texto>.

⁸ The Manuel Belgrano Strategic Scholarship Program promotes access, retention and completion of undergraduate and graduate studies in key areas for the country's development.

<https://www.argentina.gob.ar/educacion/becas/becas-manuel-belgrano>

corresponding to 29.7% of the total, that is, slightly more than 400 thousand students (Ministry of Education, 2023c). In sum, between 2014 and 2021, the number of Progresar Scholarship beneficiaries in national universities more than doubled, covering approximately 233 thousand new students (García de Fanelli; Broto, 2023, p. 181).

For the study cases we have been describing, in 2023, the following scholarship programs for undergraduate and graduate students are observed:

Table 2 – Student scholarships. Year 2023

UNSL	UNViMe
CREER	Connectivity Scholarships 2020
Financial Aid	Financial Aid
Consideration for services	Transport
Dining room	Kindergarten
Student Residence	Food Aid
Childcare	Completion of Studies
Integral	Academic Merit
Intercity and Medium Distance Transport	Sporting Merit

Source: author's elaboration based on data published in the UNSL Annual Statistical Synthesis.

We can say, as a partial conclusion for this section, as highlighted by Gessaghi (2005), that both national and local policies aim in accordance with what a CIPPEC study marks as, among other criteria: i) Guarantee conditions of social equality for all its citizens in access and retention; ii) Increase access of lower-income students to higher education levels of the educational system, paying special attention to their conditions; iii) Understanding education as a right for all, scholarship programs can be conceived as a means to remove some of the obstacles that prevent its fulfillment; iv) The selection criteria for beneficiaries should be based on their unfavorable socioeconomic condition that contributes to the vulnerability of subjects; v) Academic merit should not be an applicable criterion for scholarship renewal; vi) Universities could provide pedagogical support to scholarship recipients in the form of guidance or academic tutoring in the first years with the objective of monitoring their performance and providing the necessary support to facilitate students' passage through the level and adapt their cultural universes; vii) Scholarships should cover the real duration time of the careers chosen by beneficiaries.

We provisionally conclude this section by expressing that student scholarships constitute a reassurance policy for students to remain and graduate, enabling forms of public and institutional financing that bring students closer to this new reality, granting

them possibilities within the framework of shortening economic gaps characteristic of the contexts where young people inhabit and transit their schooling processes.

As a partial conclusion, we can point out that both national and local policies are oriented in the same direction as expressed by a study from the Center for Implementation of Public Policies for Equity and Growth (CIPPEC). Among the most relevant criteria, the following stand out: a) Guarantee conditions of social equality for all its citizens in access and retention; b) Increase access of lower-income students to higher education levels of the educational system, paying special attention to their conditions; c) Understanding education as a right for all, scholarship programs can be conceived as a means to remove some of the obstacles that prevent its fulfillment.

Likewise, the study maintains that the selection criteria for beneficiaries must be based on unfavorable socioeconomic condition, and not on academic merit, especially when renewing scholarships. In this framework, it is recommended that universities offer pedagogical support — through tutoring and academic guidance in the first years — in order to accompany adaptation, monitor performance and provide the necessary support to facilitate the university trajectory. Finally, it is emphasized that scholarships should cover the real duration of the careers chosen by beneficiaries

In relation to the Argentine case, Doberti, Gabau and Levi (2020, p. 21) explain:

In the Argentine case, public financing toward universities is supply-oriented, given that there is no system of vouchers or contract-based establishments that take funds based on student decisions. The only part of the budget that is linked to demand consists of an amount for scholarships destined for students with fewer resources, whose objective is to facilitate payment of some individual costs (materials, notes, books, food, transportation or housing) and opportunity costs (income not obtained by students because studying prevents or reduces the hours available to work). Scholarships represent 2.1% of the public budget allocated to the university system, which gives an idea of their limited impact

In this way, we can provisionally conclude that student scholarships constitute a reassurance policy to favor student retention and graduation. Their existence enables forms of public and institutional financing that, while still showing reduced impact, contribute to diminishing economic gaps linked to the contexts in which young people inhabit and develop their educational trajectories.

4 Special teacher financing programs: targeted policies

Finally, we will emphasize that in the recent decade a series of special programs from the national ministry of education took place that aimed to strengthen university teaching staff in the first years, thinking about the student reality that we have described above. These programs of great impact in public universities directly affected the so-called item 1 of the university budget. It should be clarified that item 1 in public university financing corresponds to functional teaching staff, which generally represents almost 90% of the budget granted annually to each university.

These "ad hoc" Programs granted new teaching positions or increases in their dedications, from simple (10 clock hours) to semi-exclusive (20 clock hours) or from semi to exclusive (40 clock hours). This measure was implemented to ensure the operation of student enrollment retention. In the first year of operation, the university committed to implementing it, and if it functioned during the second year, the financial amount of the positions would consolidate item 1 as a stable functional staff budget.

Starting in 2005, the Secretariat of University Policies (SPU) launched quality policies for national university institutions, in a first stage, oriented toward improving teaching in careers declared of public interest. In 2007, support projects for careers in the Social Sciences area were launched, and in 2009, they were expanded to Humanities careers (Education, Philosophy, History, Letters and Languages). In the design of these policies, in addition to the mentioned organizations, the national career associations had particular influence: the Council of Deans of Social Sciences and Humanities Faculties (CODESOC) and the National Association of Humanities and Education Faculties (ANFHE). From the perspective of institutional actors, these programs had much to do with the history of those associations, in a context of general economic growth and state policies to improve university conditions. While those measures did not mean a generalized increase in university budgets, they included programs like PROHUM for improving equipment, infrastructure and teaching salaries (Garate, 2024, p. 4).

Along with Prohum, other programs were also developed whose objective was improving teaching such as the Project for the Improvement of Teaching in the first year of undergraduate careers in Exact and Natural Sciences, Economic Sciences and Computer Science (PACENI)⁹; the Support Project for Social Sciences Careers (PROSOC) dedicated to social sciences careers such as social work; PEFI for career completion; the National Nursing Training Program (PRONAFE)¹⁰ and finally we

⁹ For more information, you can consult the following website: <http://www0.unsl.edu.ar/paceni.html>.

¹⁰ For more information, you can consult the following website: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/2017-03-03-programa-nacional-de-formacion-en-enfermeria.pdf>

highlight the Scholarships to Stimulate Scientific Vocation, from the National Interuniversity Council¹¹ which annually grants an important budget for the initiation of young researchers. Currently these programs have already been consolidated in university budgets and only a new figure of state financing exists, which are the Program Contracts (CPI)¹².

5 Preliminary Conclusions

We have arrived at a provisional end to the present analytical description, accounting for the behavior of university enrollment, student scholarships, and special financing programs. All of these constitute ways in which one can look at and demonstrate how public financing and the use of current and non-current resources behave in relation to the recent decade, as a state public policy. In this journey, centered especially on the analysis of two public universities in the Nuevo Cuyo region, it becomes evident that the different national initiatives are expressed in the concrete institutional life of territories, producing differentiated impacts that at the same time respond to a common logic: expand access opportunities, strengthen retention, and consolidate the quality of university teaching.

First, we note that student enrollment has been showing notable growth in contemporary times due to the dynamics inherent in the diversification of the Argentine university system. The creation of new institutions and undergraduate and graduate programs has generated greater territorial coverage, which has allowed populations distant from major urban centers to access higher education for the first time. This expansion process not only reflects a policy of access democratization, but also constitutes a central factor in regional development and in the consolidation of a first generation of university students in various spaces throughout the country.

¹¹ Within the framework of the "Plan for Strengthening Scientific Research, Technological Development and Innovation in National Universities" (Res. Pl. No. 676/08 and 687/09), the National Interuniversity Council (CIN) offers Scientific Vocation Encouragement Scholarships (EVC – CIN Scholarships) for undergraduate students from public university institutions who wish to begin their research training. For more information, you can consult the following website: <https://www.cin.edu.ar/lanzamiento-de-la-convocatoria-2024-de-las-becas-evc-cin/>

¹² Within the framework of the "Plan for Strengthening Scientific Research, Technological Development and Innovation in National Universities" (Res. Pl. No. 676/08 and 687/09), the National Interuniversity Council (CIN) offers Scientific Vocation Encouragement Scholarships (EVC – CIN Scholarships) for undergraduate students from public university institutions who wish to begin their research training. For more information, you can consult the following website: <https://www.cin.edu.ar/lanzamiento-de-la-convocatoria-2024-de-las-becas-evc-cin/>

Second, we emphasize the close relationship between enrollment growth and the variety of student scholarships. Scholarship policies, both national and institutional, operate directly on the vulnerability conditions of incoming students, responding to very diverse social, territorial, and cultural realities. The design of flexible and situated criteria has allowed accompanying trajectories that would otherwise be interrupted for economic or social reasons. However, budgetary limitations persist that restrict coverage in the face of the magnitude of detected needs, which opens questions about the sustainability of these policies in a horizon of greater demand.

Third, we highlight the emergence of special financing programs oriented toward university teaching. These have sought to address the need to strengthen the teaching staff in the first years of study, where the largest number of students are concentrated and where the effective possibilities of retention are at stake. These programs express a strategic vision of public policy: it is not enough to open the doors of the university; it is also necessary to guarantee that teaching conditions allow sustaining academic quality, avoiding having massification lead to a deterioration of the formative experience.

In this way, the recent decade can be considered a period of significant advances in terms of citizen inclusion and educational equity. The analyzed examples show how public financing has operated on key dimensions: access, retention, and quality. In this sense, the Argentine university reaffirms its character as a social right and public good, placing subjects at the center, recognizing territorial realities, and respecting cultural diversities. This is still a provisional balance, but one that allows us to affirm that the financing policies of the last decade have consolidated a horizon in which higher education stands, simultaneously, as an engine of regional development, guarantee of social democratization, and privileged space for the construction of citizenship.

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Received in january 2025 | Approved in may 2025

MINI BIOGRAPHY

Marcelo Fabián Vitarelli

With a Master's degree in Education, he was a teacher and holds a degree in Educational Sciences from the National University of San Luis in Argentina. He taught economics and education, as well as the social organization of work and education. He has published numerous national and international academic
e-mail: marcelofabianvitarelli@gmail.com

Alicia Eugenia Olmos

PhD in Administration and Public Policy (UNC) - Postdoctoral Fellow in Education (ITEC - Mexico) - Co-Coordinator of the Secondary Education Project: Local Environment, Subjects, and Socio-Educational Responsibility (PROTRI - Córdoba) - Coordinator of Educational Workshops for Rural Education (Our School Program). Senior Lecturer in Rural Education for Primary Education; Professor of the Doctorate in Education (Catholic University of Córdoba). Secretary of Science, Art, and Technology at the Provincial University of Córdoba.
e-mail: aolmos@upc.edu.ar

Traslation by **Igor Tairone Ramos dos Santos**