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# Strategies for inclusive education at the National University of Colombia: Experience with special admission programs PAES & PEAMA

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The National University of Colombia (UNAL) has implemented actions to promote equity-focus admissions and access to higher education for more than 30 years. This article presents an overview of the functions, results, and tasks of inclusive education at UNAL based on its two special admission programs currently in operation: the Special Admission Program (PAES) and the Special Admission and Academic Mobility Program (PEAMA). Successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement are analyzed, such as the context of emergence, characterization, impact and actions to strengthen the special admission programs. The importance of these programs to promote access to higher education of populations and territories that have been historically excluded is highlighted. Programs like PAES and PEAMA serve as exemplary models that could be emulated by other institutions of higher education that seek equity-focus admissions and access and also, more equitable ratios of completions and student success.

*Keywords:* Inclusive education, special admission programs, National University of Colombia.

## Introduction

The shift from educational inclusion to inclusive education emerges from a global call for reflection, not only on ensuring access to higher education but also on empowering individuals of all backgrounds to successfully navigate their academic journey. This necessitates a holistic approach that addresses the diverse needs and experiences of students, fostering an equitable and inclusive learning environment that promotes their success. The National University of Colombia (UNAL) has been creating Special Admission Programs since the 1980s, embodying the principles and practices of educational inclusion. Recognizing the need for continuous improvement, UNAL has embraced the transformation and adaptation necessary to address the implicit challenges of inclusive education.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the functioning and responsibilities of its two special admission programs, the Special Admission Program (PAES) and the Special Admission and Academic Mobility Program (PEAMA), it is necessary to delve into various aspects that illuminate their accomplishments, obstacles, and opportunities for growth. These facets include the context of emergence, characterization, impact, and reinforcement measures for special admission programs.

## Context of emergence

To fully comprehend the successes and opportunities for improvement of the PAES and PEAMA programs, it is essential to delve into the conceptual underpinnings of inclusive educa-

tion in the Latin American and Colombian context during the twentieth century. Before delving into inclusive education, it is crucial to first consider the concept of educational inclusion. Educational inclusion entails the assurance of access to education by allocating a designated percentage of admission spots to the educational system for underrepresented populations. While educational inclusion serves as a significant precursor to inclusive education, it falls short in emphasizing the crucial aspects of ensuring adaptation, retention, and successful completion of studies within the educational system.

## Latin American and Colombian Context: A Glimpse into Transformative Educational Reforms

Rama Vitale identifies three pivotal educational reforms that shaped the Latin American landscape during the 20th century. The first of these pivotal reforms emerged with the Córdoba Reform of 1918, which reverberated across three key areas: 1) shared governance, 2) autonomy, and 3) the broadening and democratization of higher education access. On one hand, the Córdoba Reform stands as a pivotal moment in the pursuit of university autonomy in Latin America. This principle grants institutions the freedom to establish their own rules and regulations, fostering academic freedom, institutional innovation, and the unfettered pursuit of knowledge. Several prominent universities in the region exemplify this commitment to university autonomy. The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), and all public universities in Colombia proudly uphold this legacy. These

institutions have flourished under the protection of autonomy, contributing significantly to the intellectual and cultural vibrancy of their respective regions. Co-governance, on the other hand, represents a structure that empowers various stakeholders, including faculty, students, and alumni, to actively participate in decision-making processes within the university.

The second reform gaining momentum in the 1980s, prioritized the expansion of educational access through the establishment of new private higher education institutions. This strategy not only led to an expansion of educational offerings but also, as Rama (2006) notes:

facilitó la significativa expansión del sector privado, medido en términos de cobertura, matrícula e instituciones, sobre la base, en general, de un pequeño sector de calidad, y otro mayor, orientado a la absorción de la demanda insatisfecha y con menores exigencias de calidad (p. 46).

this strategy facilitated a substantial expansion of the private sector, as measured by coverage, enrollment, and the number of institutions. An expansion characterized by two different types of institutions, first a small high-quality sector, and second a larger sector focused on absorbing unmet demand with less stringent quality requirements (p. 46).

This second reform fostered an education system in which the expansion of educational opportunities coincided with widening gaps in quality and access to higher education for social sectors with fewer resources and opportunities.

Finally, in the mid-1990s, a third educational reform emerged to address the detrimental effects of the second reform and advocate for systemic changes. The third reform advocated for a higher education model anchored in principles of contextualization, interdisciplinarity, flexibility, and internationalization. This new approach sought to redefine the concept of educational coverage, moving beyond the mere expansion of educational offerings and focusing instead on ensuring quality, equity, and inclusion in the learning process. These principles subsequently served as the foundation for various regulations, including Agreement 033 of 2007 of the Higher University Council, which adopted them as part of its eight guiding principles.<sup>1</sup>

Within this context, Colombia enacted Law 21 of 1991, which mandates that measures must be taken to guarantee members of indigenous peoples the opportunity to access quality education at all levels, on an equal footing with the rest of the population (Congress of Colombia, 1991, Article 26). Following the enactment of Law 21 of 1991, the 1991 Colombian Constitution was adopted, enshrining pluralism and human dignity as fundamental pillars. The 1991 Constitution underscores the significance of safeguarding the rights of historically marginalized

ethnic groups, including their participation, access, and continued presence within the education system, with due regard for the preservation of their cultural identity.

The promulgation of the 1991 Constitution gave rise to a series of laws that not only provided regulatory frameworks but also established guidelines for the implementation of all educational regulations.

### *What is inclusive education?*

Inclusive education emerged as a global paradigm within a broader context that: 1) acknowledges the persisting disparity in access to higher education among various demographic groups, 2) aims to comprehend and foster the diverse capacities of individuals participating in the education system, and 3) strives to eliminate barriers that impede both access and persistence in higher education.

The following section will define key concepts to establish a clear understanding of the UNALs approach to inclusive education. These concepts, derived from insights gathered through various studies conducted at UNAL, represent the university's original contribution to the understanding of inclusive education. The first fundamental concept is inclusive education, which is defined as a strategy for designing and implementing public policies that promote social inclusion by prioritizing students within their respective contexts, acknowledging their life experiences, and valuing their diverse abilities as essential factors for access or admission, retention, and completion of higher education programs. To address access barriers and counteract inequalities and exclusion throughout the educational process, the Ministry of National Education has outlined six characteristics of inclusive education. Aligned with UNAL's context, these characteristics are interpreted as follows:

- *Participation*: This approach focuses on identifying the unique needs of each student and fostering their active and meaningful engagement within the educational system. This approach embraces the active involvement of all students, irrespective of their individual, cultural, or skill-based differences, in the educational process, providing them with opportunities to express their opinions, contribute their experiences, and participate in decision-making.
- *Diversity*: This principle encompasses the recognition and inclusion of all individuals in the pedagogical endeavor. Harnessing the diversity of all educational stakeholders, by identifying and nurturing individual needs and potential, can transform the learning environment

<sup>1</sup>Principle of Flexibility: adapting academic, pedagogical, and administrative practices to meet the needs of the environment. Contextualization principle: integrating cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions into educational processes. Interdisciplinarity principle: fostering the integration of diverse disciplines in academic and practical settings. Principle of internationalization: recognizing local knowledge as a foundation for universal understanding.

into a more accessible and enriching space for all. In this context, social, cultural, and individual characteristics are not merely valued; they are catalysts for a more profound learning experience.

- *Interculturality*: Fostering a vibrant tapestry of cultures, this approach nurtures exchange, dialogue, and the acquisition of diverse cultural knowledge. Anchored in mutual understanding, equity, and collaboration, it empowers each student to blossom fully within a multicultural and diverse environment.
- *Equity*: A steadfast commitment to ensuring that every student, irrespective of individual or cultural distinctions, enjoys the privilege of fair and appropriate educational opportunities. Transcending mere equality, equity relentlessly pursues the dismantling of obstacles and challenges that hinder students' progress, ensuring that each individual has the unfettered opportunity to realize their full potential. Equity entails tailoring pedagogical resources, supports, and approaches to the unique needs of each student, honoring and embracing their diverse learning journeys, with the unwavering goal of achieving equitable educational outcomes for all.
- *Quality*: The capacity of an educational system that empowers every student to achieve their full potential, fostering meaningful and effective learning experiences that transcend individual, cultural, and ability differences. This is achieved through the creation of accessible learning environments that foster inclusivity, the implementation of adaptive pedagogical strategies that cater to diverse learning styles, and the cultivation of an educational environment that celebrates and honors the richness of human diversity.
- *Pertinence*: Refers to the adequacy and relevance of educational practices, curricula, and learning environments that effectively addresses the varied needs and characteristics of every student, ensuring meaningful learning experiences that transcend backgrounds, abilities, and circumstances. Pertinence in inclusive education entails crafting and delivering instruction that embraces the tapestry of student diversity, seamlessly adapting to their cultural, social, and emotional landscapes.

### Special Admission Programs at the National University of Colombia: Embracing Educational Inclusion

The emergence of special admission programs at the UNAL reflects important discussions in Latin America regarding the significance of educational inclusion and inclusive education models. Driven by the pressing need to ensure equitable access to higher education for historically marginalized populations residing in Colombia's peripheral regions, UNAL prioritized territorial expansion and enhanced access as cornerstones of its commitment to educational inclusion.

In parallel with the development of regulations for the im-

plementation of special admission programs, preliminary provisions were also introduced to support retention and graduation, which, in line with the principles of inclusive education, aimed to recognize and celebrate ethnic and cultural diversity.

To fully comprehend the academic and territorial impact dynamics of special admission programs, it is essential to consider Colombia's vast geographical expanse, encompassing 52,156,254 inhabitants and an area of 1,141,748 km<sup>2</sup>, roughly equivalent to the combined territories of Texas and California in the USA. Moreover, Colombia's diverse topography, characterized by the Andes mountain range spanning from south to north divided in three branches, vast stretches of the Amazon rain forest, and expansive plains in the Orinoco region, presents unique challenges in terms of mobility and accessibility. The university's campuses (sites) are strategically located across Colombia, with Andean Sites (SA) serving as the central hub, alongside regional campuses in Bogotá, La Paz, Manizales, Medellín, and Palmira. In addition, four National Presence Sites (SPN) serve as regional outposts, fostering a deeper connection to diverse communities across Colombia: the Amazonia site in Leticia, the Caribbean site in San Andrés, the Orinoquía site in Arauca, and the Tumaco site in San Andrés de Tumaco (see figure 1). These SPN are distinguished by being border sites and have clearly defined areas of regional influence.

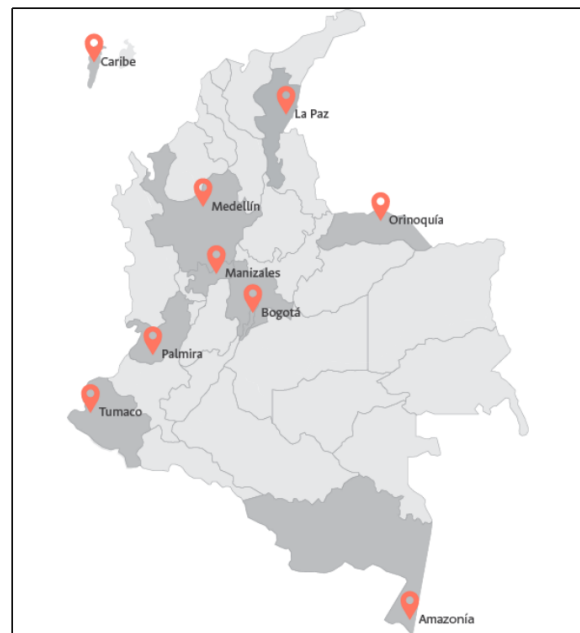


Figure 1

#### Campuses of the National University of Colombia

Special admission programs PAES and PEAMA were spearheaded to broaden access to quality higher education for high school students from underserved communities and remote areas. To make sure that eligible applicants from PAES and

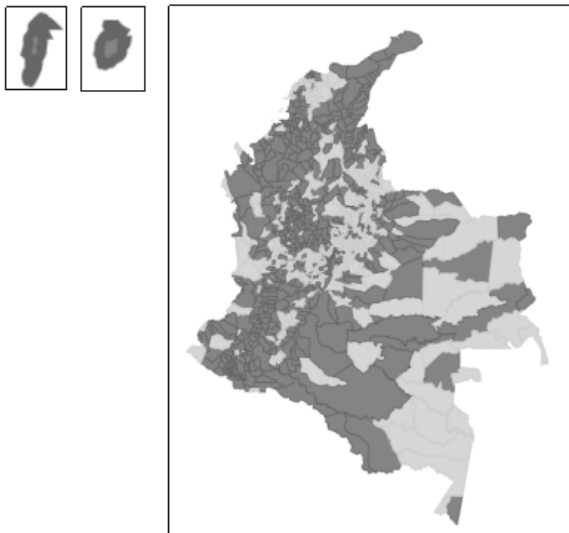
PEAMA programs can enroll, new rules for the admissions process were proposed. The next section provides a brief overview of these programs to understand their operation and unique aspects, which will help us grasp their distinctive impacts and challenges.

### The Special Admission Program (PAES)

PAES aims to ensure equitable access to quality higher education for historically excluded populations at the national level. This program targets five specific groups, each with distinct admission criteria, and includes comprehensive support guidelines for applicants and admitted students. See the regulations and provisions in the Appendix, table 1.

Notably, PAES students begin their studies directly at one of the university's five Andean campuses, making it crucial to monitor their academic progress and adaptation to university life. Similarly, PAES students have full access to UNAL's entire academic catalogue, encompassing all 102 programs, provided they meet the minimum score requirements for each program.

As the PAES program targets five population groups across Colombia, it draws applicants from a wider range of territories (see figure 2) than the PEAMA program (see figure 3). This is attributed to the varying population sizes of the targeted areas.



**Figure 2**

*Map of municipalities of residence of those admitted to PAES*

### Special Admission and Academic Mobility Program (PEAMA)

The PEAMA program emerged as a special admission initiative, aligned with UNAL's institutional mission as outlined in Agreement 011 of 2005.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, it addresses the objectives outlined in paragraphs 1 and 7, emphasizing national reach,

unity, and the development of a vibrant academic community across Colombia.

The PEAMA was regulated by Agreement 025 of 2007. This agreement not only incorporates the provisions mentioned earlier but also mandates adherence to Law 1084 of 2006. As stipulated by Law 1084 of 2006, Higher Education Institutions must reserve 1% of their admission spots for high school graduates from departments without higher education institutions and another 1% for applicants from municipalities with limited access or public order issues. Under PEAMA, these municipalities are those identified within the area of influence (see Figure 3).

Given the above, UNAL included two important differences within the articles of PEAMA to distinguish it from PAES. First, PEAMA focuses on applicants residing within the area of influence of its national presence campuses (SPN),<sup>3</sup> assigning the following specific territories to each SPN:

1. Amazonian Campus: The Departments<sup>4</sup> of Amazonas, Caquetá, Guainía, Guaviare, Putumayo, and Vaupés. The municipality of Piamonte in the Department of Cauca, the municipalities of La Macarena, Mapiripán and Puerto Concordia in the Department of Meta and the municipality of Cumaribo in the department of Vichada.
2. Caribbean Campus: the Department of the San Andrés Archipelago, Providencia, and Santa Catalina.
3. Orinoquia Campus: the Departments of Arauca, Casanare, Guaviare, Guainía and Vichada. The municipality of Cubará in the Department of Boyacá, the townships of Samore and Gibraltar, both in the municipality of Toledo in the Department of Norte de Santander, and the municipalities of Macarena, Mapiripán, and Puerto Concordia in the Department of Meta.
4. Tumaco Campus: The Departments of Chocó and Putumayo. The municipalities of Barbacoas, El Charco, Guaitarilla, La Tola, Magüi Payán, Mallama, Mosquera, Olaya Herrera, Pizarro, Providencia, Ricaurte, Roberto Payán, Santa Bárbara, and Tumaco in the Department of Nariño, and the municipalities of Guapi, López de Micay, and Timbiquí in the department of Cauca.

The territories within the areas of influence are typically isolated areas characterized by limited access, public order issues, and a lack of quality public education opportunities.

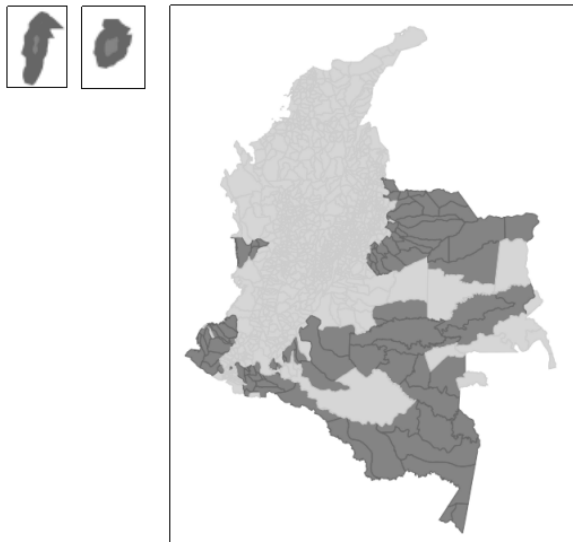
The second distinctive aspect of the PEAMA program is its phased structure, consisting of three stages designed to facilitate students' adaptation to university life and contribute to regional development. These stages include:

<sup>2</sup>See Institutional Mission at: <https://unal.edu.co/la-universidad/mision-y-vision>

<sup>3</sup>Translators note: The word to describe a campus at the National University of Colombia is the Spanish word *sede* (site). For this reason the acronym for national presence campuses is (SPN).

<sup>4</sup>Translators note: The word Departamento is the equivalent to State or Province in English.

1. Initial Stage: Addressing the first objective and bridging the gap between secondary and higher education curricula, admitted students begin their studies at one of the four SPNs, where they attend courses in reading-writing and/or basic mathematics, tailored to their specific curricular programs. Students also may take an introductory course on university life, which, while part of the elective component, is strongly encouraged to help them understand the university's academic and administrative processes. It is worth mentioning that aligned with the academic curriculum of each SPN, some coursework is drawn from the foundation or disciplinary component of the program. This first stage is considered an initial immersion in university life and preparation for mobility to the Andean Campuses.
2. Academic mobility: Upon completing their initial stage, students transition to the Andean Campuses for their chosen curricular programs. The expectation is for students to successfully complete their academic plans during this stage. The mobility stage poses a significant challenge for the university in terms of providing support, as the transition to the Andean campuses can be culturally jarring for students who must relocate from their home regions to an unfamiliar environment.
3. Final stage: To ensure the program's territorial impact, the university seeks to encourage students to conduct their degree work on issues relevant to their communities. However, this may not always be feasible due to a lack of adequate resources or support.



**Figure 3**

*Map of residence municipalities for PEAMA students*

Figure 3 shows in dark gray the municipalities of origin of those admitted to the four SPNs. Of the 1,104 municipalities in

the country, the PEAMA has admitted people in 97 municipalities in Colombia. Departments not included in the zone are shown in light gray.

Unlike the PAES program, PEAMA does not offer the full range of curricular programs from the National University of Colombia. PEAMA offers 86 curricular programs, which have been gradually expanding based on the ability of each SPN to accommodate the initial stage and the SAs to accommodate the mobility stage.

Comparing the two special admission programs, it can be observed that PAES has a population approach, while PEAMA has a territorial approach. In contrast to the population approach of PAES, PEAMA's territorial approach leads to differences in not only the target population/territory but also in average tuition, temporary leaves, dropout rates, and other factors.

### Impacts and results of PAES and PEAMA

The development and implementation of strategies like PAES and PEAMA have presented various institutional challenges in order to generate training processes that favorably impacted the student population. To achieve truly inclusive education, special admission programs must not only focus on admissions but also extend their impact to the stages of student retention, graduation, job placement, and potential return to their communities of origin.

Under this framework, institutions of higher education must embrace a commitment and social responsibility in their educational policies, programs, and projects to continuously monitor and evaluate the impacts and outcomes of inclusion strategies. UNAL, through its PAES and PEAMA programs, is dedicated to analyzing the diverse impacts of these programs both within the University and in the external territories or communities they serve. Conducting impact studies or implementing internal evaluation processes is one way to identify the strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement of the PAES and PEAMA programs. Impact studies and internal evaluation processes enable the collection, systematization, and analysis of information from various sources to assess both positive and negative impacts, identify potential causes, and determine improvement strategies.

A recent study by Wilches et al. (2023) identified the primary objectives of the National University of Colombia's PAES and PEAMA programs:

1. Provide high-quality higher education access to high school graduates from underserved communities and territories.
2. Foster Colombia's territorial development by training students from communities or territories prioritized by special admission programs.
3. Provide comprehensive student support focused on admission, retention, and graduation, tailored to the aca-



ademic and contextual needs of special admission program students.

4. Promote academic and professional training aligned with the social and territorial contexts of Colombia.
5. Ensure inclusive and equitable higher education that strengthens the academic training processes and outcomes of special admission program students.
6. Develop strategies within the special admission programs to foster collaboration between faculty and students in research and extension initiatives at UNAL.

This section presents statistics, indicators, and perception data related to the impacts of PAES and PEAMA under objectives 1, 2, and 3. This information helps assess the internal and external impacts of these programs. Internal impacts will be assessed based on student learning trajectories, including dimensions such as coverage, absorption rate, number of graduates, academic averages, and averages of enrollment studied at program completion.

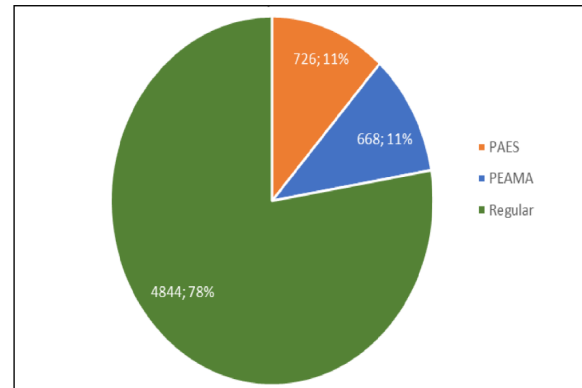
External impacts will be evaluated using data from UNAL's National Directorate of Curricular Undergraduate Programs. This data was collected through surveys and interviews with PAES and PEAMA graduates as part of the 2007 Academic Reform Evaluation Project. In addition to the statistical data, perceptions related to the return to territories or communities, return objectives, and territorial impact will be explored to further assess the impacts of these programs.

### Coverage and matriculation rates

UNAL holds two admission cycles per year. Due to the calendars of secondary schools, the admission process for the first half of the year, typically starting in February and ending in June, receives a higher number of applicants. The University's matriculation rate is approximately 10% for the first-semester admission process and 15% for the second-semester admission process. However, this trend experienced significant fluctuations in 2021 and 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

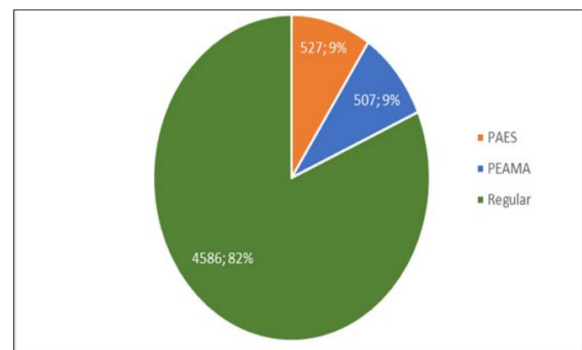
The 2023 admission process saw an 11% matriculation rate for the first semester, with 6,238 young people admitted out of 56,576 applicants. For the second semester, the matriculation rate increased to 18%, with 5,620 young people admitted out of 30,095 applicants. Among the 6,238 admitted in the first half of 2023, 726 were admitted through the PAES program (11%) and 668 through the PEAMA program (11%). The second semester of 2023 saw 627 PAES admissions (9%) and 507 PEAMA admissions (9%) (See Figures 4 and 5). Over the past five years, UNAL has consistently allocated around 20% of its admissions capacity to young people from disadvantaged social and territorial backgrounds who face significant barriers to accessing higher education.

As one of Colombia's institutions of higher education with the broadest coverage, it stands out that UNAL continuously and permanently offers two special programs in its admission



**Figure 4**

*Distribution of undergraduate admitted by type of admission period 2023-semester 1*



**Figure 5**

*Distribution of undergraduate admitted by type of admission period 2023-semester 2*

processes to promote inclusive access to higher education.<sup>5</sup> The PAES and PEAMA programs have become the university's primary strategy for leveraging professional training to generate positive impacts across various dimensions for special protection groups and diverse territories facing marginalization and neglect.

### Graduates, time to completion, and academic performance

The PAES and PEAMA programs excel in admissions by employing structured and regulated procedures that foster inclusive educational opportunities. However, their impact extends beyond admissions, encompassing adaptability, retention, graduation, daily university life, and extracurricular activities during the training process. Inclusive education principles require educational institutions to undergo substantial transformations in their academic and operational practices, fostering learning

<sup>5</sup>See: <https://snies.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/>

environments that embrace the diversity of educational stakeholders and consequently establishing conditions conducive to student retention.

Several indicators, including graduation rates, average time to program completion, and academic performance, provide a partial yet valuable assessment of the retention and outcomes of the PAES and PEAMA special admission programs. Examining these indicators can reveal whether the learning processes are yielding effective results. Additionally, it can identify areas of weakness or deficiency that necessitate improvement initiatives. Acknowledging the PEAMA program's graduates, it is noteworthy that the first cohort graduated in 2013, reflecting the program's inception in 2008. With a total of 898 graduates, the program has distributed its graduates across the regions: 464 from PEAMA-Orinoquía, 293 from PEAMA-Amazonia, 97 from PEAMA-Caribe, and 44 from PEAMA Tumaco (as shown in Figure 6). The distribution of graduates for each PEAMA region aligns with the allocation of admission spots for each SPN. PEAMA Orinoquía has consistently had the highest number of spots, currently at 220, followed by PEAMA Tumaco with 200 spots, PEAMA Amazonia with 110 spots, and PEAMA Caribe with 70 spots. The comparatively lower number of graduates from PEAMA Tumaco stems from its later establishment in 2015.

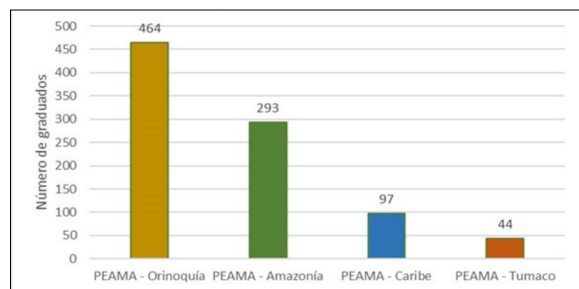


Figure 6

Historical graduates of PEAMA per SPNs from 2013 to 2023

However, when examining the graduation rate of PEAMA over the number of admitted applicants who acquire student status and meet graduation requirements, the indicator reveals that only 29% of the PEAMA population has successfully completed the academic program and graduated. PEAMA's graduation rate falls below the national average, which currently stands at 42%<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, it is crucial for UNAL to devise and implement a range of academic support and student services strategies to enhance PEAMA's graduation rate.

The PAES program has produced a total of 3,569 graduates, comprising 1,107 PAES-Best-High school graduates, 1,107 PAES-indigenous communities, 919 PAES-Best-High school graduates from poor municipalities, 368 PAES Afro-Colombian population, and 46 PAES-Victims of the internal armed conflict in Colombia. The distribution of PAES graduates mirrors the establishment

timeline of each modality. This explains the higher number of graduates from modalities that have been in operation for a longer period.

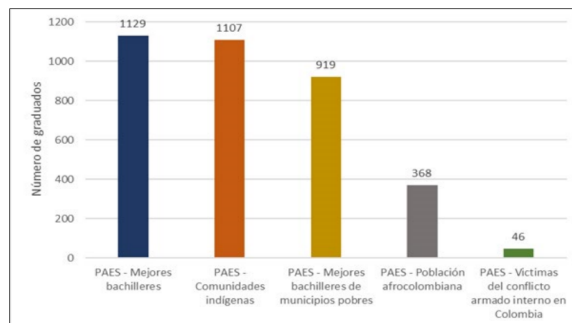


Figure 7

PAES graduates by modality from 2010 to 2023

The academic performance of PEAMA and PAES students exhibits a positive trend, with PEAMA students achieving an average GPA of 3.9 and PAES students an average GPA of 4.0 (see Figure 8). The academic performance of PEAMA graduates aligns with the average GPA of 3.9 achieved by regular admissions students, while PAES graduates surpass this benchmark by one-tenth of a point. In the Colombian education system, the academic grading scale ranges from 0 to 5. Students fail a course if their score falls between 0.0 and 2.9. The minimum passing grade is 3.0, with grades between 3.0 and 3.9 considered acceptable. Grades between 4.0 and 4.5 are considered excellent, and grades between 4.6 and 5.0 are considered outstanding. The strong academic performance of PEAMA and PAES graduates serves as a powerful counterpoint to the negative perceptions held by some members of the university community regarding the academic abilities of the students in these programs.

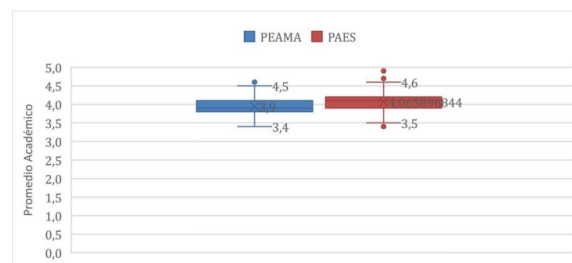


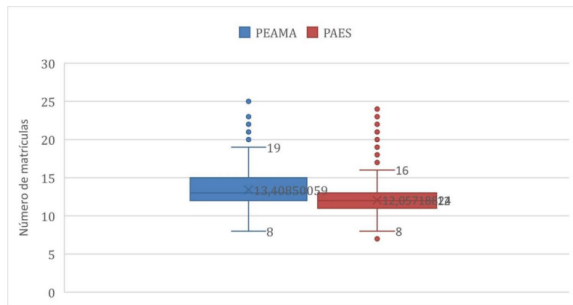
Figure 8

Distribution of the academic average of the PEAMA and PAES graduates

<sup>6</sup>See: <https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/sistemasinfo/spadies/secciones/Estadisticas-de-desercion/>



PEAMA students are taking around 13 terms to complete their studies, while PAES students require around 12 terms (see Figure 9). However, this completion time could be extended due to the provisions of academic flexibility, which allow UNAL students to hold up to two semester leaves during their program enrollment. Since the majority of curricular programs can be completed within ten terms, it is crucial to develop strategies that reduce completion times, considering the various costs and consequences associated with exceeding the projected graduation time by more than two or three semesters.

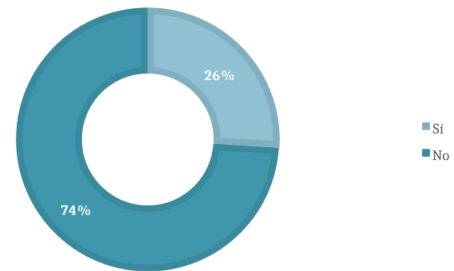


**Figure 9**  
Distribution of the average number of enrollments completed by PEAMA and PAES graduates

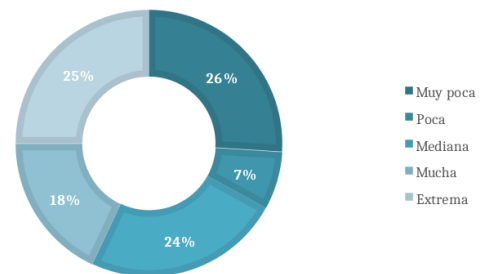
**Return and impact at the regional level**

As illustrated in the maps presented above, the special admission programs have a significant presence across the entire national territory. Assessing the perceptions of graduates regarding the nationwide territorial impact of these programs is crucial. A study published in the book *Avances y retos para una educación inclusiva: Aportes desde los programas especiales de admisión PAES y PEAMA de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia* (Advances and Challenges for an Inclusive Education: Contributions from the Special Admission Programs PAES and PEAMA of the National University of Colombia) found that 81% of graduates believe these programs have had an extremely significant impact. Out of this percentage, 56% believe the impact has been concentrated in urban areas, while 25% perceive an impact in both urban and rural areas. While these figures demonstrate the substantial success of special admission programs in terms of regional impact, it is evident that there is an opportunity to enhance their impact on rural areas. This presents a considerable challenge for the university in terms of research and extension. Fostering research collaboration among university faculty and students necessitates a concerted effort to strengthen dialog and establish connections with territorial authorities, community leaders, alumni, and institutions from both the public and private sectors, both nationally and internationally.

Leveraging the University’s existing presence in border regions, the SPN and SA can collaborate on research or extension projects that directly address the needs of communities and territories across the nation. Enhancing the territorial impact of PEAMA programs hinges on facilitating the return of both final-year students and graduates to their respective territories. As mentioned earlier, the PEAMA program comprises three stages, culminating in the completion of the degree project in the student’s original SPN or in any of the territories of influence. As a second option, the development of degree projects that address relevant regional issues is promoted. Despite the established regulation, as illustrated in Figure 10, only 26% of students return to their SPN or territory of origin to complete their final stage. Conversely, as shown in Figure 11, 67% of students choose degree project topics that align significantly with their territories of origin.



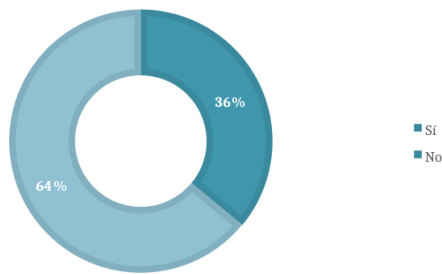
**Figure 10**  
PEAMA graduates that return to SPN to pursue its final stage: the final research project. Note: The population responds to a survey of PEAMA graduates



**Figure 11**  
Relationship between the final research paper and a theme related to the territory. Note: The population responds to a survey of PEAMA graduates

While 64% of graduates return to their territories upon graduation (see Figure 12), there is an opportunity to enhance the

university's support and encouragement for students to connect with their territories of origin before completing their degree programs. Hence, the implementation of a Return Plan in the SPNs is currently being advocated for. This involves engaging students as interns or trainees in various areas of the SPN, as well as in public or private sector entities with which the university has agreements. This initiative has connected 19 students to complete their final stage of study during the academic periods of 2023-semester 1 and 2023-semester 2. Additionally, it has provided support for one student to conduct visits to the SPN for their degree project.



**Figure 12**

*PEAMA graduates who return to their territory of origin when graduating. Note: The population responds to a survey of PEAMA graduates*

This strategy particularly benefits PEAMA students. However, it is also recognized that strategies should be developed to foster stronger ties between PAES students and their communities of origin. This implies that enhancing territorial and cultural recognition could have a significant impact by fostering research on local issues and encouraging qualified professionals to contribute to their communities.

### Improvement challenges and opportunities

Given the university's commitment and social responsibility to its special admission programs and their beneficiaries, it is crucial to identify areas for improvement and address the challenges faced by these programs. This will pave the way for enhancing academic and well-being conditions for the participants.

Therefore, we will outline some key strategies to continue implementing these programs effectively and support students in successfully completing their curricular programs.

### Pedagogical practices

Particularly in the PEAMA program, it has been identified that the cultural, social, political, and even environmental diversity of the SPN regions, along with the interdisciplinary nature of

the classrooms, requires teachers to continuously update, reflect, and adapt traditional pedagogical models. This creates teaching and learning environments that are sensitive to the diverse abilities and knowledge and experiences that students bring to the classroom. While the continuous adaptation and flexibility of the pedagogical approach in the SPN is commendable, there is an opportunity to enhance adaptation in terms of gender inclusivity and accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

Teachers' reflection on traditional teaching models and their relevance in the current context is also an area for improvement. This highlights the importance of the SA maintaining an open dialogue with the SPNs to share pedagogical practices and explore the potential of students as active participants in the teaching process, considering their prior knowledge, experiences, and everyday lives.

It is essential to recognize that incorporating students' knowledge into the learning environment has a positive impact not only on individual students but also on the relationship between the university and the surrounding communities. This integration makes the concerns of these communities and their territories a central element of academic reflection and practice. In this context, it is crucial for teachers to contextualize the course content by considering the interests, skills, and opportunities offered at the local level for PAES and PEAMA students. This not only enriches students' educational experiences but also contributes to building a more relevant education, one that is responsive to local needs and committed to the holistic development of communities.

### Evaluation and monitoring

The book *Avances y retos para una educación inclusiva: Aportes desde los programas especiales de admisión PAES y PEAMA de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia* explores the connections between the UNAL's mission activities and the special admission programs PAES and PEAMA, examining how these interactions influence the previously defined regions. The book also highlights the importance of conducting a comprehensive diagnosis, evaluation, improvement plan, and monitoring process for special admission programs.

Evaluating special admission programs is crucial because it enables an in-depth and critical examination of their progress and outcomes by assessing strengths and weaknesses, evaluating the achievement of objectives, and making informed decisions to enhance their implementation. In addition, self-assessment fosters accountability, adaptability, and resource optimization, leading to a more efficient and effective approach for goal attainment and continuous learning throughout the process.

Therefore, the book proposes a model of statistical, documentary, and assessment indicators that enables the diagnosis and evaluation of special admission programs in accordance with their established objectives. This model has become the

primary tool for evaluating special admission programs and is being implemented across the entire university community and with select external stakeholders. The goal is to gather data for evidence-based decisions that address the actual needs of these programs.

### Concluding thoughts

The National University of Colombia, through its PAES and PEAMA programs, has strived to move beyond a narrow understanding of educational inclusion, which often focuses solely on establishing quotas for differential admission. Drawing from the experiences of the PAES and PEAMA programs, UNAL has identified weaknesses and challenges it must address in its student learning processes. The goal is for these programs to have a positive impact not only on quantitative indicators but also on the processes of teaching, research, outreach, and university culture. This impact will be achieved by recognizing and integrating the rich diversity of knowledge and practices brought by these young people.

The experiences of the PAES and PEAMA programs serve as a valuable model for other institutions seeking to implement similar initiatives. It is crucial that educational systems at all levels integrate policies and structural changes aimed at bridging educational gaps. These efforts should encompass both differential access and fostering learning and university environments that acknowledge and respect the diverse backgrounds and sociocultural conditions of all individuals within the educational community.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Regulations and provisions of the Special Admission Program (PAES)

<b>Population and Regulations</b>	<b>Provisions for Admission</b>	<b>Additional Provisions</b>
Indigenous communities, Agreement 022 of 1986 of the Higher University Council (CSU), Agreement 018 of 1999 of the CSU	Registration at no cost for the admission process. A quota equivalent to 2% of the quotas established for each curricular program of the admission spots	Students who are admitted must provide their professional services to the community of origin for a term of no less than one year. Those who secured scholarship loans may have them forgiven for providing professional services to Indigenous communities, as outlined in the regulations. Minimum tuition payment. Scholarship loans are available
Best high school graduates from poor municipalities, Agreement 93 of 1989 of the CSU	Registration at no cost for the admission process. A quota equivalent to 2% of the quotas established for each curricular program of the admission spots	Minimum tuition payment. Scholarship loans are available and contingent upon academic performance
Top high school graduates, Agreement 30 of 1990 of the CSU	Free registration for the admission process	Minimal tuition fees. Scholarship loans are available and contingent upon academic performance
High school graduates from the Black, Afro-Colombian, Palenquera and Raizal population, Agreement 13 of 2009 of the CSU	Free registration for the admission process. A quota equivalent to 2% of the quotas established for each curricular program of the admission spots	Minimum tuition
Victims of the internal armed conflict in Colombia, Agreement 215 of 2015 of the CSU	Free registration for the admission process	Minimum tuition. To ensure that admitted students can benefit from the special credit lines and subsidies offered by the National Admissions Office, this Office will release a list of those admitted under this modality. The Academic and Student Life offices must track the academic progress and well-being of students admitted under this modality to support their continued enrollment and graduation