



Educational Pathways: Young Peruvians in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Vanessa Rojas Arangoitia, Gina Crivello, and Adriana Alván León

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Young Lives, Oxford Department of International Development (ODID),
University of Oxford, Queen Elizabeth House, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1865 281751 • Email: younglives@qeh.ox.ac.uk • Twitter: [@yloxford](https://twitter.com/yloxford)

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The authors

Vanesa Rojas Arangoitia is a Research Associate and Adriana Alván León is a Research Assistant at Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE). Gina Crivello was a key member of the international qualitative study of Niños del Milenio (Young Lives). She participated in the design of this sub-study and contributed seminal comments and reflections to the initial findings. Sadly, Gina passed away on April 11th 2022 and was unable to see the final version of this document. We miss her dearly and are grateful to her.

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Summary

Young people have suffered most from the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America. They are also the ones who will have to cope with the effects of the pandemic in the future (OIT/ILO 2020a). As UNESCO (2021) states, the pandemic constituted a highly complex scenario in which emergency remote and virtual education emerged as a useful, though not perfect, tool.

This paper presents findings from the second instalment of a telephone follow-up study conducted over two consecutive years, 2020 and 2021, with the Younger Cohort (19- and 20-year-olds) of the qualitative longitudinal Niños del Milenio (Young Lives) study in Peru. This study aims to highlight the changes and continuities in the educational challenges faced by young people in relation to the COVID-19 crisis.

Based on their testimonies, the paper explores the obstacles to their access to education, but above all, factors that appear to be interfering with or jeopardising the continuation of their studies. It also examines the roles played by the state and families, as well as young people's perception of the low quality of education, in their decisions on whether to continue in higher education. It shows how these young people clearly perceive the negative consequences of prolonged virtual education on their emotional well-being; the specific barriers that only young women perceive – related to traditional gender roles; and the changes in the educational aspirations of those who were not studying, as well as the difficulties these young people face in accessing jobs that allow them to save and continue with a life course that includes higher education.

The public policy recommendations outlined here aim to strengthen safety nets for young people by: promoting improvements in the quality of higher education – on campus and blended – both university and technical; reintegrating those who had dropped out of the education system; implementing job training and training for young people living in poverty who were unable to make the transition to higher education; and identifying and supporting young people whose emotional well-being has been affected.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on young people, limiting their current and future opportunities. According to OIT/ILO (2020a), young people are among those who will suffer most from the social and economic consequences of the pandemic in Latin America, and will also be the ones to cope with its effects in the future.

The impact in terms of education has been significant. In the first year of the pandemic, according to the National Youth Secretariat (*Secretaría Nacional de la Juventud* – Senaju 2021), the number of students moving into higher education decreased by 15 per cent. In mid-2020, university dropouts increased considerably (by 5.7%), but by the end of 2020 there was already a slight recovery of 2.1 per cent. However, while e-learning was useful in containing the country's dropout rate in 2020, it has not been optimal, let alone equitable. For example, Young Lives found that the digital divide affected the digital access of young people from the poorest families, and that over half of the students felt that they were receiving a low-quality education, even lower than before the pandemic (Sánchez et al. 2022). Moreover, young people's employment has also been affected. According to UNFPA data (UNFPA 2021), between the first and second quarter of 2020 in Peru there was a sharp drop in youth employment (-46.3 per cent). Furthermore, although recent data from the Young Lives telephone survey (Sánchez et al. 2022) shows a significant recovery of youth employment by the end of 2021, the gender gap in employment between men and women has increased from 11 per cent to 24 per cent in the last two years.

This paper presents qualitative research based on a follow-up telephone call with 21 young people, aged 19 and 20, who are part of the Young Lives qualitative study in Peru, to learn about their educational pathways during the pandemic. It shows the perceptions of young people from different settings – urban and rural – regarding the main challenges they faced in relation to their experience of emergency virtual education (in 2021), and continuity in, and access to, higher education during the pandemic. The findings show the predominant role played by the economic resources of families for access to higher education and educational continuity in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. They also show how young people who have managed to continue in higher education perceive their education to be of low quality, that the isolation that virtual education entails has a negative impact on their emotional well-being and, for women, that the burden of domestic chores interferes with their dedication to their studies and learning. Finally, compared to 2020, young people who had dropped out or who had not managed to access higher education are finding it more difficult to access or return to education.

The rest of the paper is divided into five sections. The first presents an overview of recent academic literature – mainly from Latin America and Peru – related to the impacts of COVID-19 on young people in education, work and welfare. The second outlines the measures taken by the state to ensure continuity in education, and the current political context. The third part provides the research methodology, while the fourth presents the main findings from the interviews with the young participants, and two case studies that highlight the impact of COVID-19 on the life course of young people who were forced to interrupt their studies due to the impact on their family finances and the limitations of the virtual education provided. The final section presents conclusions and policy recommendations.

Including the voices of young people in this report aims to bring their concerns to the fore, making visible the challenges they perceive in their daily lives. It is these young people who will later face the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their voices can help us to understand the risks they face, as well as their current and likely future needs. Knowing their perceptions can bring us closer to rethinking, as a country, the urgency of attending to this vulnerable population from a life-

course perspective. This is crucial, especially if we are to move towards meeting the targets set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 1, the elimination of poverty; SDG 3, good health and well-being; SDG 4, quality education; and SDG 5, gender equality.

1. Literature review: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young peoples' educational pathways

The last two years have seen a proliferation of studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and the restrictions on social mobility, in three areas: access to, development of, and continuity in higher education; the reduction and recovery of youth employment; and the implications of the crisis on their mental health. This literature review focuses on the findings in the first area, but also includes some findings related to mental health and the educational pathways of the young people who participated in the study.¹

Several studies point out that Latin American countries had to migrate rapidly towards emergency virtual higher education, for which they were ill-prepared due to gaps in digital connectivity (OIT/ILO 2020b). According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (*Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe – Cepal* 2020), in 2019 only 66.7 per cent of households had an internet connection; this digital divide was even more noticeable between urban (67 per cent) and rural (23 per cent) areas. In Peru in particular, the situation seemed more challenging because of geographical inequalities linked to internet connectivity. At the beginning of the pandemic, 90 per cent of rural Peruvian households lacked internet access (Cepal 2020).

The reviewed studies focus mainly on the obstacles that COVID-19 has generated for young people's educational pathways. Research indicates that the primary obstacles to educational access are technological, digital and economic in nature (BID 2020; Elacqua et al. 2022; Pedró 2021; Portillo et al. 2020).

In Peru, pre-existing economic inequalities played an important role in young people's decisions to interrupt their university studies in 2020 and 2021. Some studies mention how lockdown restrictions strongly affected family finances, and this was a determining factor for young people to abandon higher education; students living in extreme poverty were the most affected (Benites 2021; Figallo, González, and Diestra 2020; Minedu 2021b; Rojas 2021; Sánchez et al. 2022; Uribe 2021). Olivera, Saldarriaga, and Pesantes (2021) outline how the pandemic exacerbated existing gaps in access to virtual education for the indigenous population in Peru. The Peruvian government's lockdown measures did not consider the specific situation of the indigenous migrant population, who were unable to access job opportunities and the new form of education as they lacked digital devices.

Studies addressing the technological obstacles to accessing higher education during the pandemic found a direct relationship between the absence of stable internet – WiFi or LAN – and electronic devices, and the impossibility of accessing higher education; without these devices, the probability of students discontinuing their studies increases considerably (Huanca-Arohuanca et al. 2020; Minedu 2021a; Rojas 2021; Sánchez et al. 2022). Some authors specifically mention the relationship between connectivity barriers – such as an inability to connect, or connection interruptions – and a lack of digital skills and competences, and young students' perceptions that the quality of e-learning is low (Minedu 2021b; Sánchez et al. 2022; Vilela, Sánchez, and

1 The literature review was conducted using Google Scholar. Studies published since 2020, in English and Spanish, were considered, prioritising publications on Peru and Latin America, but also taking into account the most relevant texts at a global level.

Chau 2021). Studies in Latin America indicate that young people from lower socio-economic strata who were enrolled in vocational higher education faced greater difficulty continuing in education, as they found it hard to reconcile virtual education with their work schedules (Álvarez, Labraña, and Brunner 2021; Ruz-Fuenzalida 2021). A survey by ILO, UNESCO and the World Bank in 2020 also indicates that the closure of businesses as a result of the lockdown had an impact on the completion of internships or apprenticeships in vocational higher education; this caused some students to pause their educational trajectories, putting the chance of completing their studies at risk.

Several publications also refer to the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health (Arévalo-Lara and Vega 2022; Becerra-Canales and Campos-Martínez 2021; Carvacho et al. 2021; Fernández Poncela 2020; Frutos and Tello 2020; González Velázquez 2020; Gutiérrez Llanos, Gutiérrez Pacheco, and Martínez 2021; Paricio del Castillo and Pando Velasco 2020; Vivanco-Vidal et al. 2020). A UNICEF survey (2020) among young people and adolescents in Latin America indicates that 27 per cent of participants reported feeling anxiety and 15 per cent feeling depressed. In Peru, the 2020 National Youth Report (Senaju 2021) found that 33.9 per cent of participants reported problems associated with their mental health, 10 per cent more than in 2019. According to the latest Young Lives survey report (Sánchez et al. 2022), Peru had a high prevalence of depression and anxiety in 2020 and 2021: about 24 per cent of young people reported symptoms of depression, and 30 per cent reported symptoms of anxiety.

Lovón and Cisneros (2020) emphasise the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the student population in Peru. They point out that young people have experienced a sense of loss of companionship and shared learning spaces, which have been replaced by 'self-learning', which has caused stress and anxiety. Other studies in the country and the region (Blanco and Blanco 2021; Eidman et al. 2020) use a broader perspective of emotional well-being, understood as a social process that depends on individual factors and relationships with others, and which is expressed in perceptions of life satisfaction, personal development and social well-being (McLaughlin 2014). They note, for example, that women (Carvacho et al. 2021; Saravia-Bartra, Cazorla-Saravia, and Cedillo-Ramírez 2020) and younger students are more likely to suffer from mood deterioration, stress, symptoms of depression and anxiety, difficulty sleeping, psychosomatic symptoms and social dysfunction in daily activities (Becerra-Canales and Campos-Martínez 2021; Fernández Poncela 2020;² González-Jaimes et al. 2020; Pereira et al. 2021; Torres Ceballos 2020). The most important causes include negative experiences related to the pandemic, virtual education, lack of support networks, impact of the economic recession, and difficulties entering the labour market (Mac-Ginty, Jiménez-Molina, and Martínez 2021; Rosario-Rodríguez et al. 2020; Salazar, Bautista, and Franco 2021).

The literature focuses mainly on understanding the obstacles to accessing higher education and their impact on the emotional well-being of higher education students. In Peru, there is still little research that addresses the quality of education at this level; therefore, this paper aims to contribute to this, bringing to the fore the voices of young people who are experiencing multiple and new obstacles that make it difficult for them to stay in and complete their higher education.

2 This is a mixed-method study with a qualitative component; however, as it has the same findings, it is included here alongside the other quantitative studies.

2. The Peruvian context: state policies for continuity in higher education during the pandemic

The pandemic brought about a rapid transition to virtual higher education. In response, the state has taken a series of measures aimed at cushioning the impact of this transition. As outlined by Rojas (2021), the previous Young Lives paper on higher education in the pandemic, the state's main responses have been budget allocation to educational institutions, funding and scholarships for students, design of regulatory frameworks for the orientation and regulation of distance education, and support for internet connectivity through the provision of SIM cards and laptops to the poorest students (Minedu 2021b). Despite this support, profound deficiencies in infrastructure, devices and digital skills hindered the transition to quality, remote higher education (UNESCO 2021).

To improve this situation, on 20 September 2021 the Peruvian education system declared a state of emergency for the second semester of 2021 and the first semester of 2022.³ The National Emergency Plan for the Peruvian education system provided regulation and technical support for the implementation of distance and blended learning, as well as strengthening digital competencies and institutional capacities for the distance and blended learning education service at all levels (Minedu 2021a). Given the available evidence on the pandemic's impact on young people's emotional well-being, the Peruvian state, through the Directorate of Higher Education, also addressed this issue. On 21 December 2020, within the general framework of the Mental Health Law,⁴ the Guidelines for Comprehensive Mental Health Care in Universities were updated⁵ to address these challenges. For example, the text proposes awareness-raising campaigns to strengthen self-care and comprehensive mental health care, to encourage the development of tools to manage difficult situations, to prevent stigma and discrimination associated with COVID-19, and the dissemination of telephone support lines to deal with situations related to emotional well-being.

However, despite the great efforts made in the sector, these measures of support for higher education are taking place in a context of a crisis that affects the quality of higher education. The National Governing Board of University Higher Education (*Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria* – Sunedu), a body created in 2014 with the aim of overseeing licensing, auditing and supervising the quality of the university higher education service – has been the subject of multiple attacks, which go against the guidelines for reforming educational quality. According to Jorge Mori, former Director of the Directorate of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education, the latest blow has been dealt through the approval of a law in Congress that aims to place university representatives on the Sunedu Board of Directors, thus taking away the independence of the regulatory body. This law removes the Ministry of Education's steering role and the possibility of funding public universities, thus benefiting private universities that failed to meet quality requirements and are trying to return to the system through the back door (Mori 2022). Even though this law has been challenged by the Executive, it is the Congress of the Republic that will ultimately decide whether to approve it. This delicate context shows that there is little political will to promote improvements in the quality of higher education.

3 Through Executive Decree 014-2021-Minedu and Ministerial Resolution 316-2021.

4 Through Law 30947 and regulations adopted under Executive Decree 007-2020-SA.

5 Through Vice-ministerial Resolution 277-2020-Minedu.

3. Young Lives qualitative longitudinal study and its methodology

Young Lives is an international study of child poverty carried out in four countries: Ethiopia, India (the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam. There are two cohorts in each country: a Younger Cohort of 2,000 children born between 2001 and mid-2002, and an Older Cohort of around 1,000 children born between 1994 and mid-1995. Between 2002 and 2016, both cohorts were visited on multiple occasions (2002, 2006, 2009, 2013 and 2016) to collect data from child surveys, as well as to collect qualitative data through interviews with both children and their families – in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2014.

In 2020 and 2021, Young Lives conducted a telephone survey with its entire sample in Peru. This included five calls to measure the short-term impact of COVID-19. At the same time, two rounds of qualitative (telephone) interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of 21 young people from the Younger Cohort – 11 women and 10 men – for whom longitudinal data were available since 2007.⁶ These interviews aimed to discover the perceptions of young people from different parts of the country to understand how COVID-19 was affecting their life courses, particularly their educational pathways.

The qualitative study followed up with the Younger Cohort to complement and deepen the results of the COVID-19 telephone survey. The opportunity to again gather the perceptions of young people allowed us to better understand several aspects: the fundamental role of economic resources in family decisions about continuing education, the importance of the perception that prolonged emergency virtual education is of low quality, the harsh impact of lockdown measures on the emotional well-being of young people – mainly students – and the difficulties faced by young people who had failed to access higher education when trying to get a job during the economic recovery. In their transition to adult and working life, this latter group tends to find mainly informal and precarious jobs.

Due to restrictions during the second wave of COVID-19 in early 2021, we again collected qualitative data via telephone, in October and November 2021, between the fourth and fifth call of the ongoing telephone survey with the entire Young Lives sample. As in 2020, the telephone interviews were mainly conducted in two calls, to accommodate the availability and activities of the young participants, who agreed to participate, on a voluntary and informed basis, in this new data collection process.⁷

The information in this paper is based exclusively on telephone testimonies; however, having previous longitudinal data and having personally known the participants in the case studies for more than 15 years facilitated the work, it allowed the interviews to be conducted in a context of trust and respect. Note that all the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Three thematic matrices were used to analyse the data: description of the educational or employment pathway; opportunities and challenges in the educational or employment pathway as a consequence of COVID-19; and family or institutional support mechanisms.

6 The qualitative longitudinal sample for the Younger Cohort comprises 25 participants. Four – three men and one woman – could not be reached by telephone in 2020 and 2021.

7 The call times varied between 45 and 75 minutes, depending on the interviewee's availability.

4. Qualitative findings

Table 1: Changes and continuities in participants' studies and work (2020 and 2021)

Pseudonym	2020 Study	2020 Work	2021 Study	2021 Work	Observations
Rural					
Alejandro	X		X		Studied at a public–private institute. Recipient of a Continuity of Studies scholarship.
Gabriela		X		X	2020: Dropped out of the private high school where she was studying 2020: Worked in agriculture 2021: Worked in sales in a bakery
Carmen	X		X		Studied at a private university. Recipient of a Continuity of Studies scholarship.
Hugo		X		X	2020 and 2021: Worked for a telecommunications company
Carlos		X		X	2020: Worked as a food delivery man and was a professional football player at the district level 2021: Was a professional football player at the district level
Héctor	X		X		Studied at a public university.
Daniela	X		X		Studied at a public university. Recipient of a Continuity of Studies scholarship.
Rosa	X		X		Studied at a public university.
Raquel	X		X		2020: Studied at a pre-university academy 2021: Enrolled at a public university
Fabricio				X	2020: Lost his job because of the pandemic 2021: Worked temporarily on construction sites
Urban					
Jaime	X	X		X	2020: Studied at a public–private institute and worked in the family sewing workshop 2021: Dropped out of the public–private institute and worked in the family sewing workshop
Lupe	X		X	X	Studied at a public institute. 2021: Worked in professional internships
Eva				X	2019: Dropped out of higher education 2020: Lost her job because of the pandemic 2021: Worked in a call centre
Esmeralda		X		X	2020: Worked as a promoter in Gamarra and did inventories for companies 2021: Worked as a restaurant hostess
Cristiano					Did not study or work.
Diego			X		2020: Was not enrolled in an academy and did not work, but told his family that he was preparing for enrollment 2021: Studied at a public–private institute
José	X		X	X	2020: Studied in a public university 2021: Worked in professional internships
Cecilia	X	X	X	X	Studied in a private institute. 2020: Studied and worked in the market with her family 2021: Studied, worked in professional internships and worked in the market with her family
Isabel		X	X	X	2019: Dropped out of higher education 2020: Worked in agriculture 2021: Enrolled in a public university
César			X		2019: Dropped out of higher education 2020: Unemployed because of the pandemic 2021: Studied in a private Centre for Technical and Productive Education (Cetpro)
Sandra	x		X		2020: Studied at a pre-university academy 2021: Enrolled in a public university

In 2020, we contacted 21 young people who were part of the Young Lives qualitative longitudinal study to collect their testimonies about the effects the pandemic was having on their lives, mainly in terms of their educational pathways and aspirations. In 2021, we contacted them again to talk about continuity and change in their educational challenges, and to further explore their employment situation. In both years, there were more students than young people who were only working: the educational pathway was the most common topic, and the one that generated the most data. Table 1 gives an overview of the experiences of these young people.

There were several striking changes in the life course of these young people between 2020 to 2021. In 2020, 12 of the young people were enrolled in higher education; by the end of 2021, 13 were studying. Although the numbers are similar, the educational pathways were not continuous in all cases. For example, between 2020 and 2021, two dropped out of higher education as a result of the pandemic – one rural woman and one urban man; two resumed their studies after having left in 2019 – one urban woman and one urban man; and the remaining 11 continued their educational path – four rural women and two rural men, and three urban women and two urban men. Of those who were able to continue their studies, three rural youth – two women and one man – were beneficiaries of the Continuity of Studies scholarship; no urban young person reported having applied for this benefit.⁸

In 2020, five participants – three rural and two urban – were exclusively working, three had lost their jobs as a result of the lockdown measures – one rural and two urban – and one was neither working nor studying. By 2021, seven were exclusively working – four rural and three urban – and four were working and studying. All four were urban, and three were doing pre-professional internships. The young person who in 2020 was neither studying nor working remained so in 2021.

The key findings regarding young people's experiences are set out below.

4.1. Continuity and new challenges in emergency online higher education

The first year of emergency online education, as evidenced in Rojas (2021), was a challenging year for young students in terms of access and continuity. Young people – mainly those in rural areas – faced difficulties due to little or no access to the internet and to electronic devices. However, the Peruvian state played an important role in addressing these difficulties by quickly and effectively providing educational scholarships, SIM cards to connect to the internet, and loaned laptops. In 2020, young people who had made the transition to virtual higher education reported a lack of preparation by teachers for online classes, a situation also noted in other studies (Pedró 2021; Portillo et al. 2020; Rojas 2021). Those who were most concerned about the shortcomings of virtual learning were the seven students from higher education institutes, as they felt that they were not acquiring the practical knowledge required for their profession.

When we contacted these young people again a year later, they perceived that virtual education – created in response to a health emergency – had become more widespread than expected. They were ambivalent about this, as it had managed to ensure continuity, but was of low quality. Similarly, the survey of the larger Young Lives sample (Sánchez et al. 2022), found that half (51 per cent) of the young people who were still in school felt that the quality of the education they were receiving was worse than before the pandemic.

⁸ Those who applied for the scholarship did so because a teacher at their educational institution recommended it. The selection criteria were twofold: academic performance and impact of the pandemic – the family had to be registered in the Household Targeting System (*Sistema de Focalización de Hogares* – Sisfoh) as poor or extremely poor, and to have been a recipient of the Yanapay voucher, an individual financial support of S/350 that the Government grants nationwide to elderly people who are poor or vulnerable, as well as to recipients of the Juntos, Pension 65 or Contigo social programme of the Ministry of Development and Inclusion

Below, we present the challenges these young people faced in relation to three aspects: access to, and continuity, in education; the poor quality of the service and its influence on their educational pathway; and the perceived impact of (prolonged) virtual education on their emotional well-being.

4.1.1. Challenges and opportunities for access to, and continuity in, education during the pandemic

The latest Young Lives newsletter (Sanchez et al. 2022) reports that, of 19- and 20-year-olds enrolled since the beginning of 2020, 23 per cent had dropped out of school by the end of 2021. The most common reasons for dropping out were largely the same as those found in 2020: inability to pay tuition fees, lack of means to participate in virtual classes (no internet access, computer or smartphone), cancellation of classes and the need to look for a job. One-third of the young people who dropped out of school did so for financial reasons. However, an important finding in the quantitative results is the weight of the digital divide as a reason for dropping out: over a third of 19- and 20-year-olds without digital access had dropped out by the end of 2021, compared to only 10 per cent of those with access to digital media.

Analysis of the qualitative data from 2020 found that the state's response, mainly at the university level, was crucial to ensuring continuity in education for those young people who were able to stay in school. Those who lived in rural areas and studied in public universities pointed out the importance of state support – through SIM cards with internet connection and laptop loans – for them and their families. They considered that, if they had not had this support, they might have dropped out of school (Rojas 2021). Students at a public university in rural Andahuaylas explained the process: once the need for internet access and technological devices was identified, the distribution of SIM cards was organised through a survey by affiliated centres that asked students where they lived. Those who said that they lived in or – because of the quarantine – had moved to the rural community in which their families resided were identified as beneficiaries of the SIM cards. It should be noted that none of the three students from the rural jungle area – two from public–private institutes and one from a private university – reported having received this benefit.

I didn't have a computer or a laptop, I only had my mobile phone ... I didn't have the internet or a computer to be able to continue ... the university gave us SIM cards with internet

And from that moment on, when they gave you the computer and the chip, was it easy to connect?

Yes, because a computer or laptop was necessary to do your work ... it was very helpful.

(Héctor, rural, public university, 2020)

The situation was different for urban youth attending public universities. Though they were aware that this type of assistance existed and felt they could have accessed it in both 2020 and 2021, they chose not to apply because their households already had internet service so that several family members – mainly school-age children – could continue their studies. They also said that the SIM cards did not work well and were not targeted at them, but rather at poorer students or those living in remote areas.

Yes, I got it, but I didn't go to pick it up because we were travelling that day, they usually give it out on Saturdays and I didn't go because here at home my sister also [had] a mobile line, to pay for internet. So, I didn't need to pick up the SIM card ... But they told me that it's a bit slow, it does help, but ... the internet signal of the SIM card they give from the university is a bit slow.

(Sandra, urban, public university, 2021)

While the initial response from the state was substantial, a year later the same young people reported that the support had certain limitations. For example, young people from the rural area of Andahuaylas said that the SIM cards they initially received did not work properly and that the internet signal was poor. Although they were provided with laptops in 2020, they had to give them back at the end of the year and did not receive them again in 2021. These limitations made it difficult to access virtual classes and, as a result, some of these rural families were forced to contract an internet service at home or on their mobile phones. Between 2020 and 2021, only two rural families in Andahuaylas were able to buy laptops for their children. Although the context of the pandemic led to a greater expansion of internet services in rural areas, the poorest families, those who live in these communities and had been receiving state support, found it necessary to invest substantial resources, with great effort, to purchase internet access.

We had been given an emergency computer from the Computer Science programme. We had to return it because it didn't belong to the School of Administration and that was it. ... There was an internet problem, we had to return it and bring back another computer ...

(Héctor, rural, public university, 2021)

The speed of the internet was slow, there was no good signal. Then they switched to another operator. And that's more or less how things are now. [For the last two months] I have had internet installed in my house, so I hardly use it [the SIM card] anymore. Otherwise, I would simply miss classes, because there was no one to share [the internet] with me.

(Raquel, rural, public university, 2021)

Unlike young people in rural areas, most of the interviewees in urban areas lived in the same household as other relatives – predominantly siblings, nieces and nephews. When virtual education started in 2020, they decided to upgrade the service they already had, or to get a new one, so that all students in the family could have access to classes.

I guess [the disadvantage of virtual education] is the materials. They used to give us printed copies and now we have to print, and sometimes we don't have a way to print.

(Sandra, urban, public university, 2021)

The holidays have started. With a month to go before the start of the second semester, they asked us for the computer, and we returned it for maintenance. It was supposed to last a week and so far, they have not said anything. The laptop wouldn't connect to the internet, so we had to buy it ourselves.

(Rosa, rural, public university, 2021)

And has it been easy for you to cope with virtual education?

The truth is, it's complicated, isn't it? When you buy the megabytes to access the internet, it's practically 10 soles [£2.30] a day for the classes.

The [private] institute where you studied didn't help you with any of that?

No, because ... the classes were from home.

(César, urban, private secondary school, 2021)

In short, households – regardless of place of residence or level of poverty – were forced to incur extra costs associated with connectivity, whether to improve internet access, purchase electronic devices, or invest in educational materials.

However, emergency virtual education also opened new opportunities for access to education and online socialisation among young people from different parts of the country, albeit with some restrictions. Some enrolled in courses that they would not have been able to access before the

pandemic. Yet, as the young rural woman below rightly points out, access to these new opportunities was difficult for young people from rural families because of their economic situation and poor internet connectivity.

Most of my classmates also can study or live in a better economic situation, you could say. They have had the chance to study at the ICPNA [Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano (Peruvian-American Cultural Institute)] in Lima ... they have been able to access other classes as well. They wouldn't have been able to do that if it was face-to-face, because, if they wanted to study, they would have had to go to Lima ... but as it is virtual, they have been able to benefit from some of them, haven't they?

(Daniela, rural, public university, 2021)

Although some interviewees – mainly those in private institutions located outside their hometown – did have the opportunity to access courses with peers from different parts of the country, they perceived this more as a difficulty than an opportunity. For example, Carmen said that students from rural areas – like herself – were not always able to connect due to the poor quality of the internet they had, a situation that generated negative reactions from some teachers who, instead of understanding the difficulties of these young people living in remote areas, seemed to punish them.

The teachers in Lima ... say: 'they have to get connected no matter what ... they have to check their internet in advance'. They don't experience, or haven't experienced, the internet going down, because they are in a place where, well, it doesn't rain.

(Carmen, rural, private university, 2021)

Finally, in order to promote continuity, the state promoted scholarships for students in higher education who performed well academically, belonged to vulnerable households and were at risk of dropping out of school due to the impact of the pandemic. Among our interviewees in 2020 and 2021, no young urban people were beneficiaries of the Continuity of Studies scholarship, but three students from rural areas were: Alejandro, a student from a public–private institute in the jungle; Carmen, from a private university in the Amazon; and Daniela, from a public university in the highlands. According to their testimonies, they were able to access the scholarship because of their good educational performance, because their families were listed as poor in the Household Targeting System (Sisfoh) and because their schools were accredited by the Ministry of Education (Minedu).

The [Continuity of Studies] scholarship is covering this..., which is... well, the monthly payment ... a help to finish our studies. At the beginning they gave me money to buy a laptop. After that, it only [covers] the monthly payment.

(Alejandro, rural, public–private high school, 2021)

I was able to apply for the university's Continuity scholarship offered by the government ... But ... they told us [that the scholarship would cover] until we complete university. That is, if you don't appear as poor in Sisfoh but as normal, they don't take away the scholarship, that's for sure.

(Daniela, rural, public university, 2021)

This benefit was an important relief for the young rural students and their families, whose economic situation had been affected by the COVID-19 lockdown measures; the families of these three young people faced the loss of employment of at least one household members, as well as crop failures.

Overall, we found that while virtual education provided new opportunities for students, the poorest students, who, coincidentally, live in rural areas, experienced the greatest challenges to remaining in school. State support in the form of internet SIM cards and laptop loans, for

example, was highly valued, but insufficient in light of two years of non-face-to-face studies; this forced families to make enormous economic efforts to ensure access to, or continuity in, education for young people. As a result, the state's response, although timely and rapid in 2020, seems to have reached its limits by the second year of virtual education.

4.1.2. Perceptions of poor-quality education in the pandemic

In 2021, the young people stated that they felt better adapted to the virtual format, and that, compared to 2020, several teachers had improved their skills in teaching via virtual platforms. However, they continued to question the pedagogical strategies of most of their teachers, regardless of where they studied and the type of education they received. For example, they stated that their teachers continued to give monotonous virtual classes, in which they only read the contents they had prepared for the class but did not offer opportunities for ideas to be exchanged, either among classmates or with the teacher.

I think it's his way of explaining, ... it's very absurd, ... I mean... what they do, like they do it grudgingly. They don't do it with the same passion [as] when someone likes teaching ... they shout at you. If you don't come in on time, they also shout at you, they don't let you into the classes ... and so on.

(Cecilia, urban, private secondary school, 2021)

There are very few teachers who teach you well online and explain it to you ... Some just solve the exercise and change it at the touch of a button, they don't ask you any questions or anything ... Few teachers make an effort ... only some of them have a way to help us all learn ...

(Isabel, urban, public university, 2021)

Teachers too, I don't think they are used to giving lessons online. So, they talk, they talk, they talk, they're giving their class ... But some of the students are ... not so focused, they are doing other things, and some of the classes are not dynamic and you don't learn, well, almost nothing or enough ... some [teachers] don't even demand participation.

(Héctor, rural, public university, 2021)

Young people also reported that in the virtual classes they have to do more homework or work outside class hours. This is not necessarily reflected in better learning. As almost all of them mentioned, homework is copied and pasted from the internet more easily than before. This ends up having an impact on young people like Daniela, who recently got access to technology. She observed an unfair change in her marks and those of her classmates as a result of the transition to virtual classes.

Some of them just overwhelm you with work, with presentations, and it's not like [in] face-to-face classes [where the teacher] is there with you, interacts with you or explains to you, more in depth I think ... In this virtual thing, many of my classmates, in the classes before, had lousy grades, and now it's like they got better grades ... they are more, like they are not afraid, they copy.

(Daniela, rural, public university, 2021)

[In the virtual format] they give you too many tasks. When they do their classes, some [teachers] just read, read, read, read, or sometimes they don't even prepare their PowerPoint, they download it from Google and that's all ... some just do their hours ... they read their PowerPoints and you don't learn, you have learned almost nothing.

(Carmen, rural, private university, 2021)

In general, these young people consider face-to-face education to be better than virtual education because it is more demanding. For example, in face-to-face education it is not possible to solve exams by copying and pasting, or to look up information to answer the teacher's questions while they are asking them, which can be done easily in virtual education. The students pointed out that they are not learning in the same way as they would have done in the classroom, they are learning less. However, they also recognise that they are advancing in their education – passing courses more easily – which will eventually lead to a professional degree and then to a job.

Through the screens you don't know what the students are doing, right? Some of them are sleeping and I don't know ... it's not like face-to-face classes, you don't feel like you're in the mood to learn. ... now we are advancing virtually in the classes and, well, you don't have that confidence, you could say, to ask the teacher some questions ... I think virtual teaching is ... very bad ... It's not like face-to-face.

(Rosa, rural, public university, 2021)

Students also mentioned benefits of virtual education, but these were not around the quality of the education, but rather with saving time and money on travel, and the convenience of studying from home. Overall, at the end of 2021, when we conducted the data collection, students perceived that the virtual education they were receiving was of low quality.

I think [it] harms students because they are no longer reading or investigating ... they don't learn ... as it is virtual, there is no control. For example, we can be doing other activities, they are not looking at you, you don't pay attention and that's how the class goes ... I don't find anything good about it ... being in front of a screen is tiring ... I don't like spending time in front of a computer or reading ... Education before was better face-to-face than virtual, I think.

(Carmen, rural, private university, 2021)

Some of the advantages [are] ... I have the internet at my fingertips and it's easier ... Anything you could be asked to do, a job, you could research it right there. For example, one of the advantages is that we learned how to manage all these conference applications. Another advantage is that you don't have to spend money on [bus] tickets, or that you don't have to wake up so early to get ready, that kind of thing.

(Héctor, rural, public university, 2021)

Moreover, part of the problems associated with online education are the parallel activities that students engage in while attending classes. Some engage in other activities because they do not feel motivated, but others because they need to work or support their families by doing domestic or care work. On the latter point, it was the women who again pointed out – as they did in 2020 – that during their virtual classes they had to fulfil other responsibilities at home, which was an obstacle to their learning.

When I'm in class, sometimes ... I'm also having dinner and listening to the class, or I'm cleaning and I'm listening ... The ideal would be to be one hundred per cent there, right? Sitting, with your laptop, but, ... you can't, can you, because there's always something to do ... cooking, ... cleaning ...

(Lupe, urban, public high school, 2021)

It's a bit hard, but I've always tried to fit in time to help everyone ... I get interrupted when I'm cooking, it's been there since half past 12, almost an hour now ... I try to cook there, and sometimes I lose an hour or an hour and a half when I'm cooking ... I'm listening to the class [I'm connected], but I can't understand it anymore.

(Isabel, urban, public university, 2021)

The young people who were most concerned about the low quality of the training they were receiving and the consequences of this on their career paths were those in vocational higher education. They stated that there is relevant practical learning that they have not been able to access in the virtual classes.

For example, I have done my internship now and the truth is, as it was my first internship, I didn't really know much, because I was learning in virtual classes. I was only defending myself with theoretical knowledge ... I should have had practical knowledge and then they shouted at me, they told me: 'How can you not know that?' And that affects you ... it was horrible ... The face-to-face class has an atmosphere, something practical, we also had our separate laboratory to do our hands-on practice there. And, well, you learnt a bit better there, to be honest. On the other hand, in the classes or in the virtual exams they gave you a little less time, sometimes you also lose the internet and it's chaos ... I think I would have had more preparation in itself; I see myself at zero right now.

(Cecilia, urban, private high school, 2021)

Just because of the internship. It's like you're going to teach a doctor through the computer. That's not possible. You need to go, see a body, be there practicing.

(Diego, urban, public-private high school, 2021)

I prefer face-to-face ... Because, if you get lost in something, the teacher can help you ... being on a screen sometimes makes you sleepy, it's happened to me ... In face-to-face it was stricter. I see it and that's it, virtually, not much ... but in the classroom I would have learnt more [laughs].

(Alejandro, rural, public-private secondary school, 2021)

That said, the young people in the qualitative sample were critical not only of the education they have been receiving, but also of their own performance as learners in virtual education. They questioned the quality of what they are learning, as they perceived virtual education to be easier and less demanding. On the one hand, they know that they are advancing in their educational trajectory, but on the other hand, that they are not necessarily learning what they need to practice their profession in the future. Women and students undertaking vocational studies mentioned this conflict the most: the former, because they have to deal with the burden of domestic activities as well as their studies; the latter, because they were aware that they were not receiving basic practical knowledge for their training that they could only acquire in face-to-face classes.

4.1.3. Emotional well-being and emergency virtual education

Although this research did not intend to collect information on the emotional well-being of young people, the topic came up naturally in the conversations. Based on the results of the fifth Young Lives COVID-19 phone call, we noted with great concern the high prevalence of symptoms of depression and anxiety in the surveyed students. In 2020, 25 per cent of them had symptoms of depression and 31 per cent had symptoms of anxiety; by 2021, these figures were 24 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively.

Online education at home has benefits and conveniences related to saving time and money because students do not have to travel. However, it has also affected their sense of emotional well-being, with young people reporting feelings of anxiety, stress and loneliness.

I think that when you are like that, locked up, you get a bit anxious or your back hurts, or you want to go out.

(Héctor, rural, public university, 2021)

Yes, I would like to [return to face-to-face education], because being here is always stressful, I mean being locked up at home. In my case, I get up at about 6 o'clock, I go downstairs to make breakfast and then I have classes until 1 o'clock and all that time I don't leave my room ... We are supposed to stay until 1 o'clock, but they gave us one more activity and we stayed one or two more hours after the classes finished and that was more stressful. My classmates also said that they were already a bit stressed about it.

(Sandra, urban, public university, 2021)

Last year it was a bit more complicated because of the whole social situation we were going through, the pandemic, being isolated, the uncertainty about whether things were going to get better or not, and so on. That's what perhaps affected the emotional part a little bit.

(Lupe, urban, public high school, 2021)

You get bored sitting there alone for so long.

(Alejandro, rural, public secondary school, 2021)

Sometimes we have courses that are four hours long, and sitting in front of a screen while the teacher reads his PowerPoint ... it's boring, it makes you sleepy, and sometimes they start to leave you more homework, articles in the virtual classroom, books that you have to read on a screen and it's tiring.

(Carmen, rural, private university, 2021)

In 2020, the young people mainly referred to the feelings of anxiety associated with the lockdown and uncertainty about COVID-19. One year later, however, it seemed that the stress was associated with the excessive time spent alone in front of the computer. This, for some, affected their motivation to study, which contributed to a decrease in their attention to what was happening in class. They perceived that the lack of socialisation has affected their learning, but has also led to feelings of loneliness.

I don't want it to be virtual any more ... It's very stressful now ... Being with my classmates is a very nice phase of being a student, apart from the fact that it will never come back [laughs] I would like to enjoy those moments ... well, you learn more [in person] because there you can interact with other people, even with the questions that come up at the time, those things.

(Carmen, rural, private university, 2021)

I think it [the pandemic] has affected my personality ... My behaviour is more closed, not so social anymore ... I mean, because I am closed, as well ... I don't have so many friends anymore ... I think that before I was a bit freer, that is, my mind was a bit broader.

(Héctor, rural, public university, 2021)

Female students in both urban and rural areas mentioned how stressful it was for them to “do everything” at home. Some found it very difficult to cope with their academic responsibilities, domestic duties and caring for other family members at the same time. In addition, it was the women who acknowledged that they felt anxious about their studies and identified that this was affecting their physical health. They reported changes in their eating habits, resulting in eating disorders and weight gain, as well as headaches associated with overexposure to screens.

... every day sitting in front of the computer, sitting, ... it bores me to be at home, it's not like the face-to-face, is it? ... I've put on a lot of weight, the food, because you're always sitting, it's affected me in that way ... you get headaches, you're always stressed, bored, because you're always at home ... my parents ... bought a syrup for the headache, I'm always taking that.

(Rosa, rural, public university, 2020)

When I had exams, I felt that it was too much [to have to wash, cook, take care of her older brother and study] ... I would try to get up early, do all the things, I would go to class and sometimes, well, in the afternoon until the evening I would take the time to study for the midterm ... and also [I] told myself [that] if I didn't do those things, it's as if ... I would have felt ungrateful or something like that. [If her parents had understood her] it would have been better or maybe I would have felt less burdened.

(Carmen, rural, private university, 2021)

I feel very stressed, something like that, when I'm at home. For the virtual classes ... like at home I feel like eating all the time, I feel anxious when I'm at home, but I think it would be a different reality if we had face-to-face classes. I would go, because always when I go out, I don't have that anxiety, but when I'm at home more than anything what happens is that ... I have asked for help, because alone ... I felt I couldn't control it I'm with the psychologist and the doctor, and the therapist, and they've already given me some medication for anxiety, but ... also vitamins, because all day long I felt weak, without strength, sleepy, with a headache and all that ... It's very difficult.

(Daniela, rural, public university, 2021)

Emergency virtual education has exacerbated feelings of inequality or exclusion among students from different regions of the country. This needs further investigation. Rural youth referred to the stress associated with their place of residence and their socio-economic status. The interviews highlight feelings of embarrassment about their poor use of technology or the poor internet connection in their area. Two rural female students mentioned that they felt fear and anxiety about having to have their camera on in class, in some cases at the request of their teachers. Showing their face in close-up was embarrassing and they felt uncomfortable in front of their peers.

It's already very stressful, and besides, the teachers, some of them are not from the local branch, they're from Lima. For example, we have a teacher who ... is very strict ... She doesn't like any of our answers in the exams, it's like she wants us to do what she thinks, that is, nothing seems right to her and so, virtually, you can't express yourself because they mute the microphone or you can't express yourself as if you were face-to-face ... with the teacher ... Sometimes we cannot get connected in time and attendance has already been registered, and the teacher doesn't understand us ... in this jungle area it rains so much and the internet, when it rains, it goes away, it gets slow, and that's something that they often don't understand.

(Carmen, rural, private university, 2021)

Fear ... because they always said: 'Turn on your cameras'. I was nervous ... that my classmates would look at me, what would they think? ... I'm adapting little by little.

(Rosa, rural, public university, 2020)

These testimonies allow us to understand how lockdown measures during the pandemic have generated feelings of anxiety, stress and loneliness associated with virtual education in young people. But they also show how this situation may have amplified perceptions related to structural inequality and discrimination – dimensions that should be taken into account by any public policies related to the development of virtual or hybrid education.

4.2. The role of economic factors and perceptions of educational quality for continuing in higher education during the pandemic

The Young Lives survey shows that, by the end of 2021, one in three 19- and 20-year-olds who lacked internet access had dropped out of school, compared with only 10 per cent of those with internet access (Sanchez et al. 2022). Thus, whether they had internet access was a key factor in

this decision. The qualitative data presented below allows us to explore in more depth what other factors were involved in decisions to drop out of school.

In the qualitative sample, two participants had dropped out of school between 2020 and 2021: Jaime, an urban male, and Gabriela, a rural female. Both were students in vocational higher education and did not receive any state support such as scholarships, SIM cards or loaned laptops. Their stories allow us to understand how COVID-19 hit family economies and disrupted the educational pathways of young students living in poverty who had made a big effort to access higher education.

However, as well as economic factors, Jaime and Gabriela's shared perception of the low quality of the online education they received also played an important role in their decisions.

Gabriela was studying civil engineering at a private institute, and her case was detailed in the 2021 paper on higher education in the pandemic (Rojas 2021). The biggest obstacles for her to continue studying were lack of financial resources, the digital divide, and her perception that the quality of education had declined.

Gabriela is the sixth of eight siblings. Both of her parents had died years ago, and she was able to continue studying with the financial support of her older siblings. She lost this support due to the COVID-19 lockdown policies, and instead had to take on the responsibility of financially supporting her younger siblings. The family's economic pressures played an important role in her decision to look for a job and leave her studies. However, at the beginning of 2020, she tried to continue studying virtually, but was unable to do so because she experienced problems in accessing and connecting to the internet, and lacked devices – laptops or smartphones – with which to attend classes. At times, she and her brother had to take turns using the only laptop they had at home, so she was sometimes forced to miss classes.

Another reason that demotivated Gabriela was the perception that the quality of virtual education was lower than face-to-face education, as there were insufficient opportunities to interact with teachers and have her questions answered. Gabriela still hopes to return and complete her higher education; however, a year after dropping out of school, she recognises that her status as a woman is an obstacle to her success. Her male colleagues have managed to get pre-professional internships to complete their studies, while she has not been able to do so because there are no jobs available for women.

Box 1: Gabriela (young rural woman)

Gabriela was born and grew up with her family in the high jungle of Peru. The family's main livelihood was coffee production.

Since she was five years old, she was actively involved in domestic work: she took care of her younger siblings and helped her mother carrying water and firewood to cook together at home. When Gabriela was nine years old, her mother died, and she and her younger siblings were left in the care of her father and older sister, who took on the role of caretaker mother.

Gabriela went through primary and secondary school in the rural community where she was born. And although she was not an outstanding student, she was industrious and did her homework, but was somewhat shy. Since she was a child, it was clear to her that, when she finished school, she would only go on to higher education if her family's finances allowed it.

In 2017, she managed to enrol in a private institute to study construction. She did so with the support of her father and older siblings, who covered the costs of food, rent, and school fees.

Box 1: Gabriela (young rural woman)

In 2018, Gabriela's father died suddenly. Her older siblings continued to support her so that she could finish her studies. But at the beginning of 2020, when Gabriela was about to complete her higher education, a compulsory lockdown was declared as a precautionary measure against COVID-19. This caused an economic crisis in the family, and her siblings were unable to continue supporting her. As soon as the quarantine was lifted in her region, Gabriela decided to prioritise work and abandoned her studies.

In the village, the harvest is over. Being in the same village without working, without being able to get money, you can't be there walking around. The need is great, I had to look for money ... As a big [sister] I also have to support my younger siblings who are still there.
(Gabriela, 2020).

She tried to continue her studies virtually, but this was difficult due to poor internet connection, lack of electronic devices at home, and the perception that the quality of education had declined.

When we contacted her a year later, Gabriela had still not resumed her studies. During 2020 and 2021 she worked in agriculture, and as a domestic worker and a saleswoman in a bakery. The money she earned was spent mainly on her personal expenses – living, food and transportation – and she sent some of it to her family and saved a little with a view to returning to her studies.

Despite the time that has passed, Gabriela has not given up her desire to complete higher education, but she knows that it will be difficult. She must continue working in order to support herself, as she no longer has the financial support of her siblings. She has thought about moving to the coastal community where she had lived and studied in 2020. She believes that she could get a part-time job there that would allow her to finish her studies. She perceives her status as a woman as an obstacle to accessing pre-professional internships in the jungle community where she used to study.

A man has a better chance [of finding a job] than a woman. A man earns more anyway, the vast majority, more than a woman. ... My fellow [students] who are men have found a job in a company so that they can do their internships and finish [their studies]. And they have succeeded. They [do not hire women for pre-professional internships in civil construction because] they say it is too dangerous for them.
(Gabriela, 2021).

She is annoyed that she has not been able to finish her studies. She thinks her life would have been different if there had not been a pandemic: “[I feel] a bit bad ... Because I would have finished, and I would have been working in the career I have chosen”.

COVID-19 has been a turning point in the life course of Gabriela, who until recently had imagined herself as a professional thanks to the economic efforts that she and her family had been making since she finished secondary school.

Jaime is a young man who, unlike Gabriela, lives in an urban locality. In 2020 he was determined to continue his studies in business administration at the National Industrial Labour Training Service (*Servicio Nacional de Adiestramiento en Trabajo Industrial – Senati*). However, the experience of virtual education discouraged him, and this, together with the economic pressures faced by his family, led him to make the decision to leave his studies at the beginning of 2021.

Box 2: Jaime (young urban man)

Jaime has lived all his life with his mother, father and younger siblings in an informal settlement in the south of the city of Lima.

His father, a garment maker, used to work in an industrial market, but now has his own sewing workshop at home. Jaime has been supporting his family in the workshop since he was seven years old. As he grew older, his involvement in the workshop also grew, but although his parents constantly asked him to help, they always prioritised his studies.

At school, Jaime was an average student; not one of the first, but not one of the last. He studied primary and secondary school in public schools near his home and never repeated a grade. Due to his family's economic difficulties, three times a week he and his siblings went to a religious organisation after school, where they were provided with food and help with their homework.

When Jaime was 16, even before he finished secondary school, he knew he wanted to go on to higher education. Although his parents did not have much money, they were willing to support him. But they also told him to continue working in the sewing workshop. Although Jaime would have liked to go to university, he recognised that this was not possible because of his family's finances. Nevertheless, he was very interested in studying and completing a vocational degree at a public-private institute. He was convinced that these studies would allow him to strengthen the family business and, later, to become independent. After graduating from high school, he managed to get into the school of his choice.

In 2020, he told us that he was in the third term studying virtually because of the pandemic. Adapting to this type of education had cost him a little, but not that much, because, thanks to his parents' efforts, he had an internet connection and a computer at home. Although it was a little uncomfortable for him to study from home because his family sometimes interrupted him, he felt that he could do it. He even pointed out as positive the fact that he did not have to travel and could save the money he used to spend on transportation.

What he found most difficult was adapting to the timetables and dynamics of virtual education. Jaime was used to working in the family sewing workshop outside of his education; during those working hours, he did not keep an eye on his mobile phone. Therefore, during 2020, he was very disconcerted when he received communications via WhatsApp in which times and arrangements agreed in class were changed. Sometimes Jaime found out about these changes very late and did not hand in his homework on time. By the end of the year, he had adapted and was keeping a close eye on communications from the institute, but he was excited about the possibility of starting face-to-face classes in 2021.

When we spoke to him again at the end of 2021, Jaime was already 19 years old. He told us that, at the beginning of that year, he had left his studies in order to work full time in the family sewing workshop, because his family was going through a difficult time financially. But that was not the only reason: his assessment of the virtual studies he was undertaking also played an important role in the decision.

One bad thing [that happened to me was] that I had to temporarily suspend [my studies] ... At the beginning of this year [2021], I had to help more because we had more work ... [my parents] didn't have enough money [to hire another person]. We didn't have much work [at the beginning of 2021] I mean, we were not too bad off, but work was scarce, and we sometimes had weeks without work ... Also [I left my studies] because I didn't like the virtual service ... They didn't teach you something more advanced ... there were some subjects that they were supposed to teach us in the fourth term but they didn't. I have friends in the fourth [term] who were taught things like that about the company, more important things. Moreover, it was impossible to do the internships. (Jaime, 2021)

Box 2: Jaime (young urban man)

Jaime studied business administration up to the fourth term. He believes that the fact that he studied part of his degree online could have had a negative impact on his professional performance, not only because of the lack of practical knowledge, but also because of the low quality of the teaching:

[It affected me] because in internships, you don't have any experience, because you haven't done an internship and, in what you have studied, I have seen that those who were the worst [students in face-to-face classes] passed with 19 and 20 [in virtual classes]. They copied from each other; they passed WhatsApps to each other. (Jaime, 2021)

Jaime still aspires to finish his degree, as he only has two more terms to go. However, he knows that his role in the family business is important and that he will probably have to work with his family for a while longer.

Jaime's uncertainty is like that of other young people who are, or were, studying in vocational higher education. Prolonged virtual education has not met Jaime's expectations in terms of the learning that he considers essential for the technical professional practice, and this perception has played a major role in his decision to drop out of his studies. However, this does not negate the importance of the economic needs of poor families like Jaime's, whose members include minors who still need to be cared for and supported.

The COVID-19 pandemic has confronted poor young people – like Jaime and Gabriela – with new obstacles to continue in education. The increasing scarcity of economic resources influenced their decisions to drop out of school. Seeing themselves as adults – they are both 19 – meant that they are an important part of the family economy, so they feel they have to contribute financially to common expenses, including childcare. In Gabriela's case, financial constraints meant that she was unable to purchase electronic devices and therefore could not access online education. Other factors were the weak internet signal in her rural area and her perception that virtual education was of poorer quality than face-to-face education. In Jaime's case, a lack of financial resources led him to reconsider his participation in the family business and abandon his studies, and he also felt that virtual education was of low quality. The uncertainty experienced is particularly relevant for these two young people, who feel that their families cannot afford to waste time and money on an education that is not meeting their expectations.

This situation is worrying, considering that these two young people represent the first generation in their families that has managed to access higher education. The pandemic could be truncating the educational pathways of poor young people who, together with their families, have invested their resources in education over many years in the hope of breaking the cycle of poverty.

4.3. Challenges for young people with broken educational pathways entering the labour market

Of the 21 young people in the sample, eight were not studying in 2021. Of these, seven were working full time – four in the countryside and three in the city – and only one urban youth had neither studied nor worked since graduating from secondary school at the end of 2019. This young man, Cristiano, was unable to continue his higher education due to a lack of financial resources. His mother lost her job as a result of COVID-19 and his father had not supported him financially for quite some time.

When we spoke to Cristiano in 2021, he told us that he wanted to study in order to get a job, but because he lacked the money to do so, he had been watching videos on the internet to learn

programming. Although he hoped to study at a college or university, he was not sure he would be able to do so soon, as he did not have any support. In addition, he preferred not to look for a job yet because he was still afraid of catching COVID-19, and he planned to continue learning about programming at home through internet videos. Another reason that discouraged him from looking for work was the information he received from his relatives, who told him that finding a job at this time was complicated because of the pandemic.

No, I'm not in any university, nothing. I'm just watching YouTube. I'm learning ... on my own ... I was encouraged because I saw channels on YouTube where there are programmers ... I like programming and also looking for vulnerabilities in the system, then I would be able to report them to the big companies.

I remember you told me you were going to study computer science, are you going to do it?

No... I got discouraged, there's nowhere to go. I'd rather be coding

And have you worked?

No, I haven't worked.

And are you looking for a job?

No, not yet. I'm getting deeper into the subject I'm studying and later it can be very profitable ... It's difficult to get a job now ... a lot of people are looking for work.

(Christian, urban, 2021)

These eight young people finished secondary school at the normal age or one year later. Three managed to transition to higher education after finishing school – two urban youths and one rural girl – but then had to drop out due to lack of money in their families. Since then, they have not been able to return to school despite their aspirations. One of these young women is Eva, who dropped out of higher education in 2019 because her mother was ill and her father could no longer afford to pay for her studies. The other two – a rural girl, Gabriela, and an urban man, Jaime – did so in the context of the pandemic, between 2020 and 2021.⁹

The other five young people who were not studying and were working mentioned, in 2020, that although they had not transitioned to higher education, they expected to do so in the future, and for that they needed to work and save. They had no one in their family who could support them in higher education. As Rojas (2021) recounts, the context of COVID-19 in 2020 was an important factor for these young people to postpone their enrolment in higher education. Lockdown policies meant that they spent what they had saved up until then. One year later (2021), several of them had still not managed to make the transition to higher education, and at that time they were doing casual temporary jobs, a situation that had not allowed them to save.

Yes, I would have studied, but because ... sometimes there is and sometimes there isn't [any money], you can't save and the little money I have I had to [spend] to do other things.

(Esmeralda, urban, 2021)

All of them perceived numerous obstacles to accessing work. For example, they noted that job offers had decreased, lay-offs had increased, and that both restrictions related to social distancing and the high number of infections affected their mobility and made it difficult for them to find work. Rural youth perceived a scarcity of work in their localities. Since seasonal agricultural work is predominant in these places, at the end of a season they were forced to move

⁹ See Section 4.2.

to urban or other rural areas, where they did not necessarily have family networks. Carlos, a young man from a rural area, said that he would have liked to migrate to Lima to work and study, but he has stayed in his area at his parent's request, who are saving to cover his living expenses in the capital.

During this time, have you wanted to look for a job other than the one you do?

There is no work around here. There is no work [laughs], only the farm.

(Carlos, rural, 2021)

The young people's testimonies show that they have had to adapt to new and limited job opportunities. Some opted to travel to find employment, while others missed out on opportunities because they lacked devices that would allow them to work remotely. For example, Eva, a young urban woman who had already dropped out of higher education in 2019, lost her job in a restaurant in 2020 due to the compulsory restrictions on movement. When the lockdown measures were lifted, she was afraid to look for work because of the risk of contracting COVID-19 and transmitting the virus to her mother, who suffers from a degenerative disease and is considered at risk. However, as the crisis also affected the resources provided by her father, she had to go out and look for work. Thus, by the end of 2021, Eva had managed – with great difficulty – to get a job in a call centre. Before that, she had spent eight months looking for work but could only find opportunities for remote working which she could not accept because she lacked the equipment at home.

I didn't work, literally, all that time. I think I only started working this year, in March, April, I started working again ... last year I was trying ... sending CVs, resumes ... [This year] ... I accepted an application [for a call centre], I was in training for 15 days ... and at the end of the 15 days I decided to stay there ... I have to stay there mostly because the timetable suits me.

(Eva, urban, 2021)

Fabricio, a rural young man who never made it to higher education, reported that because of the lockdown, he lost his job as a salesman in March 2020. During that year, he dedicated himself to cultivating the family farm in order to provide food for the family. He then tried to re-enter the labour market in the rural area where he lives, but found it impossible, as most of the work is agricultural and there is only demand at certain times of the year. In 2021, he got a job in construction, but after a short time the work was stopped because of the large number of infections, so he was again unemployed – and without pay – until the construction company resumed its activities about three months later.

For Hugo, another rural young man who never made the transition to higher education, the situation was somewhat different. In the first half of 2020, he managed to get a job laying cables in a telecommunications company, but without a contract or benefits. His job opportunities were very limited: he had just finished the harvest in his rural community and knew that he would not be able to find anything where he lives; moreover, he earned less for the agricultural work than what the company paid him. At the same time, he was expecting the birth of his first child in 2021 and had to save for it.

Do you want to continue working in what you are doing, or would you like to do other things?

Well, as it's this job, a normal job, I would continue. But if there was another job with more opportunities, with more benefits, I would go there.

What benefits would you like to have in your job?

I mean, to earn a bit more than what I'm earning, that is, more support, all of that, well. ... Because of the needs I have to work. ... Sometimes there is no work elsewhere, so what else do I have to do, keep working in the same place.

(Hugo, rural, 2021)

Before, I was working in [a telecommunications company] shops and then as ... a sales adviser in [a financial company], mostly working in shops.

And you wanted to continue working like that?

Yes, and there were no more ... I was looking for

Do you think COVID-19 has had an impact on your current employment situation?

Yes ... But before, I stopped working for almost four months because there was an infection on the construction site ... And now they have just started working again, when they started to give the vaccinations.

(Fabricio, rural, 2021)

Overall, in 2021, the young people stated that, although there are obstacles, it is possible to find work. These are jobs without a contract or benefits, and they are likely to exceed the statutory eight-hour working day. For example, Esmeralda, a young urban woman who studied up to the fifth year of secondary school, mentioned that between 2020 and 2021 she had worked some months as a salesperson, an inventory taker, and in restaurants, either as a waitress or as a hostess. In most of the jobs, she had to work around 12 hours and was paid the minimum wage. The constant job changes were associated, in her case, with the time demands of her employers, the pay and the perception of the work environment.

Has it been easy for you to get a job?

Not easy, but if you get it, you get it ... If there hadn't been a pandemic, I think it would be better, wouldn't it?

(Esmeralda, urban, 2021)

The pandemic seems to have had an impact on the household economy of these young people because some – like Eva and Hugo – have continued in their existing jobs, even though they would like to change jobs. They are aware that the labour supply has decreased due to the current context and, as they need to contribute to the family economy, they cannot abandon their jobs. This situation could result in a tolerance of precarious jobs and expose some young people to precarious working conditions later on as well.

Looking at employment trajectories in the pandemic, the situation has not changed much as a direct consequence of the pandemic. The young people we spoke to, aged 19 and 20, have accessed mostly temporary, informal jobs – without a contract. Eva is the only young person who has an employment contract. Although they perceive that getting a job now is a little more difficult than before 2020, they have managed to access jobs that provide them with income to support themselves or their families.

By the end of 2021, these young people's aspirations continued to be associated with access to university or vocational higher education. The pandemic has disrupted their educational pathways as, had it not happened, they believe that they would have been able to invest their savings on studying instead of having to spend them on survival. Their current incomes do not allow them to save, and they find it very difficult to continue their studies.

Do you plan to study or is it no longer in your plans?

Yes, it is in my plans, but later. Right now, I don't have the means to pay for it.

But you think later on?

Yes, [after] *saving up to study*. My brothers and sisters [have] *families and can't support me*.

(Esmeralda, urban, 2021)

After two years of living with pandemic restrictions, the expectations of these young people have changed. Some now see their future in more practical terms and are opting for careers that they believe can offer greater stability, such as those in the health sector. The health crisis has shown them that, despite the difficulties, this sector has continued to function and is in high demand. Other young people no longer necessarily expect to go to university or high school, but rather to a Centre for Technical and Productive Education (*Centro de Educación Técnico-productiva – Cetpro*) in the hope that the technical knowledge they acquire will give them access to more job opportunities. The pandemic has also caused some to question their aspirations related to entrepreneurship, as they have witnessed the fragility of the sector in the face of the crisis.

When do you plan to resume your studies?

My plans were to study next year, but I have to postpone it until at least the middle of the year to be able to get it together.

And what do you want to study?

Nursing.

You were studying and you wanted to study communication sciences, how did you decide on nursing?

I love communication sciences ... but ... that career is a little bit vague ... Most people need some kind of family connections in order to have more opportunities ... And, well, it wasn't a career that would help me financially ... more than anything I decided to go into nursing because of the pandemic ... Because I think that during the pandemic, communications changed too much, and it wasn't a stable job. But not nursing, nursing is going to help me more.

(Eva, urban, 2021)

How did you decide to go into this career [nursing]?

Because I would like to help people. It's more about helping, isn't it?

Why did you change? Because you wanted to study something else?

Yes, gastronomy. I saw the job and that's where I was ... in the pandemic ... Because I want to have a stable job.

(Fabricio, rural, 2021)

Although these young people still look to their future with hope, they recognise that the road to achieving their educational goals will not be easy. They do not have the financial support of their families, what they earn does not allow them to save, and they know that the type of jobs they are able to get will not allow them to combine their study and work schedules.

5. Conclusions and policy recommendations

Following up with the students who participated in this research for two consecutive years has allowed us to learn about the challenges that poor young people in higher education have faced in the transition to, and remaining in, online education. It is clear from the testimonies that the efforts made by both the state and young people's families to guarantee their continuation in education were very useful and complementary; above all, we would highlight providing them with access to electronic devices and the internet. However, we also found that a central concern for the students is the low quality of the virtual education they have been receiving.

The continuation of virtual education two years into the pandemic is having a negative effect on young learners, regardless of the type of education they are accessing – public or private, university or non-university. Students in vocational higher education are the most concerned as they feel that online education is of poor quality and does not offer practical learning, which affects their training and will have consequences for their subsequent professional development.

Although Peru has been making efforts to improve the quality of university higher education through the creation of the National Governing Board of University Higher Education (Sunedu), the same progress has not been seen in vocational higher education. De Belaunde (2011) argues that even before the pandemic, only a privileged minority had access to good-quality education. This situation seems to be worsening after two years of online education and in a political context in which the progress made by Sunedu is being undermined.

The central findings of the research are summarised below.

The state's response to support access to and to be able to continue in education through emergency virtual education, although important and very useful, was found to be limited once non face-to-face education was extended during 2021. The rapid transition to virtual education had to bridge the digital divide in the country. Therefore, the state reallocated the budget for university higher education in order to support young people from the most vulnerable families (Minedu 2021b). However, despite this support, major shortcomings in infrastructure, devices and digital skills have hindered the move to quality virtual higher education (UNESCO 2021). Providing internet connection devices or laptops was not very useful for young university students in rural areas in the medium term. The internet service offered by the state was of poor quality and did not provide a reliable connection to classes. Laptop loans were only available in 2020, even though virtual classes continued throughout 2021. The Continuity of Studies scholarship was very important for students from rural areas; however, not all of them sought to access this benefit, either because they did not know about it or because they considered that, as their performance was not excellent, they would not be accepted. It should be noted that, although the best-performing students achieve higher scores, this scholarship does not exclude those with average performance.

The shortcomings of state support for continuing in higher education were borne by poor families, who invested heavily in technology and private internet access. According to the young people's testimonies, families who used the expansion of internet access in the country, which occurred as a result of COVID-19, and decided to contract internet services in their homes, found themselves financially overburdened. However, although almost all the rural families in this study were able to support their children continuing in education by covering the hidden costs of emergency virtual education, some were unable to do so, such as Gabriela's family. This is an important factor to consider in the educational pathways of young people in general, and

especially those who live in poorer families and cannot, even if they wanted to, invest in an internet connection and digital devices.

Socio-economic issues are a determining factor in continuing in education for these young people, but their perception of the low quality of virtual education, in the current context, also puts them at risk of interrupting or dropping out of higher education. Young people feel that after two years of virtual education, teachers continue to lack the pedagogical tools that encourage students' participation in class. On the other hand, evaluation or grading criteria in virtual education are less demanding than those in face-to-face education; students often copy their work from the internet and even send their answers via WhatsApp for exams. Although they are making progress in their studies, young people feel that they are not learning what they should, a situation that particularly worries those who are about to finish their degrees and students in vocational higher education, who feel that they are not acquiring basic practical knowledge for their future professional roles.

The extension of emergency virtual education has had an impact on young people's emotional well-being. After two years of virtual learning, they clearly reported feelings of anxiety, stress and loneliness. This leads us to emphasise the importance of addressing the overall mental health of young people since, as Cavazos-Arroyo, Máynez Guaderrama, and Jacobo-Galicia (2021) point out, this is related to their feelings of self-efficacy and self-perception of being good students. Moreover, some reported the emergence of eating disorders as a result of the stress of facing classes in isolation. The findings also draw attention to possible feelings of inequality and exclusion, especially among rural students.

Women perceive a greater disadvantage in their educational pathways than their male peers. Young women reported that they face greater difficulties in studying virtually as, unlike their male peers, they have to attend to their educational responsibilities and also, at the same time, take care of the family's children, or do chores such as cooking or cleaning. This is an obstacle to their learning, because they cannot concentrate their time and energy solely on their studies. This affects their emotional well-being, as they reported feeling stressed by having to deal with both responsibilities at once, as well as having to face these challenges alone. On the other hand, the young woman who had dropped out of school saw her status as a woman as a disadvantage to the possibility of resuming her educational career; she thinks that the situation is easier for men, as they have better-paid job opportunities, which allow them to save to resume their studies or to combine work and studies.

Although families' socio-economic situations are an important factor in explaining students dropping out of higher education, the poorest students' perceptions about the low quality of virtual education also seem to have a strong influence on their decision to drop out. The interruption of Gabriela's and Jaime's educational pathways are case studies that paint a discouraging scene that poor young people from different areas of the country have been experiencing in relation to their studies and work. The pandemic represented a sudden turn of events in the development of their educational pathways. Although Gabriela and Jaime came from quite poor families, they had managed – with a lot of effort – to access vocational higher education. But then they had to drop out because they understood that, as adults, they had to contribute to the family economy. They also felt that the virtual education they were receiving did not meet their expectations.

Finally, we found that young people who were not studying perceived, first, greater difficulty than before the pandemic in finding work; and second, a change in their educational aspirations. Young people indicated that, although they and their peers found it difficult to get a job, it was possible – mainly in urban areas, where there are more informal employment opportunities (without a contract). On the other hand, their testimonies indicated a certain change in their educational aspirations. Those who still want to return to their educational

pathway no longer aspired to become entrepreneurs, as they did before, but rather to train for jobs that will give them income stability. The pandemic has shown them that there are certain professions which, even in crisis situations, remain relevant.

These findings suggest several policy recommendations.

- **Speed up the process of returning to face-to-face higher education or blended learning.** Although there are already policies in place for the gradual return to universities and vocational colleges, the young students' perceptions highlight the urgency of reopening educational institutions. These are important spaces for exchange, which promote better education and contribute to emotional well-being.
 - **Promote evaluations of virtual distance education provided by universities and vocational higher education institutes.** Peru has been implementing emergency virtual education, which was not designed to be permanent. The challenges and achievements of this experience should be evaluated, and measures should be proposed to ensure that all young people in the country have access to quality virtual education.
 - **Strengthen Sunedu and ensure that the Ministry of Education plays its role in the supervision and implementation of vocational higher education institutes.** Access gaps do not seem to have changed much with the pandemic; however, perceptions of the quality of learning does seem to have changed. Higher education in the country needs not only to reach more young people and recover those who dropped out, but also to improve the quality of the service in order to expand career opportunities for students.
 - **In order to address inequalities in higher education, it would be useful to develop support programmes that promote remedial learning for those students who require it.** This would involve specific support for students in vocational higher education and for women, as they have had to cope with an overload of domestic work at home.
 - **Strengthen safety nets that promote the return of young people who dropped out of school, as well as training for those who were unable to move to higher education and thus expand their job opportunities.** It is necessary to intensify the dissemination of scholarship and educational credit programmes, including the current requirements for accessing these benefits.
 - **Promote, at the local and district levels, the training programmes for young people offered by the Ministry of Labour and Employment Promotion (*Ministerio de Trabajo y Promoción del Empleo – MTPE*) through its virtual platform.** Providing spaces with internet connection for young people seeking training, as well as some equipment, could be very helpful for those who have had to interrupt their studies and need to enter the labour market.
 - **Review mental health guidelines for higher education students. Services should not only promote the care of young people, but also develop diagnoses and provide the necessary support to those who require it. The approach to this issue should be considered not only from a clinical definition, but also from a broader definition of well-being.** These services currently only exist in universities, but they are also needed in institutes of vocational higher education. These services are currently focused on mental health, but not on diagnosing the student population, a task that is important to carry out. Earmarking specific budget allocations for this line of work – in both university and non-university higher education – is important after two years of virtual education and considering the prevalence figures and their impact on mental health during this period.
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This paper explores the educational pathways followed during the COVID-19 pandemic – 2020 and 2021 – by 21 young people in the Young Lives qualitative study. The research shows their perceptions of the challenges they faced regarding emergency virtual education, as well as in continuing, or accessing, higher education in the context of the crisis.

Based on the voices of young people from urban and rural areas of Peru, the paper concludes that the efforts of the state and families to guarantee their continuing in education complemented each other and were very useful. However, a central concern for the students is the low quality of the online education they received.