

only 12.1 percent of the national system, they are responsible for 95 percent of national research productivity, and their social role goes beyond research to reach Brazilian society in many important ways. Another unproven assertion is that public universities are populated with “leftists” and “Marxists,” while these institutions actually reflect broader society in terms of political positions.

Finally, even though public universities, traditionally, have been elitist, they have become more democratic in recent years. For example, a 2018 Survey of the Socioeconomic Profile of Students at Federal HEIs shows that 70 percent of undergraduate students at these institutions come from families with a monthly income of up to R\$1,500 (about US\$370). There are also quotas for graduates of public high schools and minority groups that contribute to diversity and help curb the country’s great social inequality.

Although the allegations of the president and his minister of education and the austerity measures they propose are met with public disapproval and attract international attention and protest, we believe that these are just initial steps toward a potential disaster for science and higher education in Brazil. ■

“More with Less” in Higher Education in Mexico

ROBERTO RODRÍGUEZ GÓMEZ AND ALMA MALDONADO-MALDONADO

Roberto Rodríguez Gómez is researcher at the Institute of Sociological Research, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico. E-mail: roberto@unam.mx. Alma Maldonado-Maldonado is researcher at the Educational Research Department, Center for Research and Advanced Studies, National Polytechnic Institute (CINVESTAV), Mexico. E-mail: almaldodo2@gmail.com.

After two attempts to win the presidency, Andrés Manuel López Obrador was elected president of Mexico for the 2018–2024 term. His higher education plan corresponds to what could be defined as a neopopulist agenda. The purpose of this article is to discuss the concept of neopopulism, compare this agenda with those of other neopopulist governments in Latin America, and share concerns on the future of higher education in Mexico.

NEOPULISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The concept of neopopulism has been used by political scientists, sociologists, and historians to describe govern-

ments based on regimes led by charismatic leaders; the development of social policies aiming to expand a strong popular support base providing legitimacy for governmental projects; the erosion and even the destruction of political and legal counterparts and of check and balance systems that may oppose presidential decisions; the spread of distrust against civil and nongovernmental organizations; and attacks against individuals, groups, and a free press that criticize the government.

With regard to education, typical neopopulist government policies in Latin America lead to a massification of educational services at all levels; the expansion of scholarships and individual subsidies provided by the government; the establishment of affirmative action measures in favor of the most vulnerable populations; and disregard for international evaluations and standardized tests. In sum, under such regimes, quantity is favored over quality. The two main higher education policy instruments of neopopulist governments are massive numbers of scholarships and enrollment growth. Two typical examples are programs established in Brazil and Argentina.

Lula da Silva, president of Brazil from 2003 to 2011, started the University for All program (known by its Portuguese acronym “ProUni”), subsidizing students enrolled at private universities. Dilma Rousseff, president from 2011 to 2016, continued this program and added two components: Financial Aid and Funding for Higher Education Students (FIES). At the end of these two governmental periods, the programs had reached 2.5 million students. In addition, the Support Program for Restructuring and Expanding Plans of Federal Universities (Reuni) created 30 new federal institutes and 25 university campuses.

In Argentina, during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (from 2007 to 2015), the Support for Argentinian Students Program (known by its Spanish acronym PROGRESAR) gave financial support to students to keep them in school or provide them with vocational training. Approximately 320,000 higher education students received this benefit. Besides this program, 18 new national universities were established, in addition to five provincial universities. Similar programs were introduced in Ecuador under Rafael Correa (from 2007 to 2017) and in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez (from 1999 to 2013) and deserve to be studied more closely.

In Argentina and Brazil, the difficulties in solving the economic crisis and cases of corruption explain in many ways the electoral victory of right-wing political parties. Mauricio Macri was elected president in 2015 in Argentina, and in Brazil, Michel Temer was elected president in 2016, followed by Jair Bolsonaro in 2019. Macri’s government carried on some of the programs established by the Kirchner administration while reducing public expenditures in

higher education, science, and technology and attempting to increase the share of private investment. In Brazil, Temer did not cancel all the programs established by da Silva and Rousseff, but he reduced public expenditures. Under the government of Bolsonaro, however, more dramatic changes are taking place with budget cuts to higher education and scientific research and restrictions to university autonomy.

NEW AGENDA

Following some of these trends, in Mexico, during his campaign, López Obrador proposed removing examinations from higher education selection processes, establishing free education for all and creating scholarships for those in greatest need. He also announced that his government will open 100 new universities (“Benito Juárez García”), which will offer curricula tailored to local development needs, while providing educational opportunities to the most disadvantaged youth in the poorest regions of Mexico. The project has been allocated a budget of one billion pesos (US\$52.6 million).

The two main higher education policy instruments of neopopulist governments are massive numbers of scholarships and enrollment growth.

EARLY SETBACKS AND CRITICISM

In August 2018, López Obrador announced before the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES) that, if elected, he would respect public spending for higher education institutions (in Mexico, more than 90 percent of the public higher education budget comes from government subsidies). Yet, the drafted budget proposal of November 2018 included a 32 percent cut to the sector that resonated with new austerity policies, but was concerning for universities. The sector halted the threat, at least in part. The subsidy for autonomous public universities was corrected to match the 2018 funding, with an increase equivalent to that year’s inflation; all other public higher education institutions (those controlled by the central educational authority) suffered cuts, and so-called “extraordinary funds” (public funding allocated through competitive processes) were reduced. The total expenditure reduction for higher education in 2019 reached 1.7 billion pesos (US\$90.3 million), which, taking inflation into consideration, represents a decrease of 6.2 percent.

REGULATORY REFORM: NEW GROUNDS FOR DISPUTE

Party representatives in Congress were forced to revise and amend the president’s constitutional reform initiative presented on December 12, 2018. The proposal eliminated the autonomy of universities. Despite a ruling parliamentary majority, legislators sought a consensual solution, which meant rewriting almost every aspect included in the initiative. Not only does the reform reinstate university autonomy, it confirms the state’s obligation to provide public institutions with sufficient enrollment capacity for students meeting entrance requirements. Also, it guarantees sufficient fiscal funding to safeguard the principle of free and compulsory education.

MORE WITH LESS?

Mexico’s higher education system has 4.3 million students (66.5 percent in public institutions and 33.5 percent in private institutions), which represents 39 percent of the 18–22 age group. The López Obrador government has set as a target to offer all high school graduates access to higher education by 2024. This goal requires 1.9 million new enrollment openings, which represents an average of 300,000 new spaces per year. To meet this ambitious target, the system would reach a gross coverage of over 55 percent of the corresponding age group. Considering the growth rate of 150,000 newly enrolled higher education students per year, doubling this effort appears to be an insurmountable task in a context of stable or decreasing financial resources for the sector. So far, the government has not outlined any clear strategy to achieve this goal. Even if Benito Juárez García universities operated at capacity, they would barely cover 2 percent of the national higher education enrollment.

Finally, despite the opposition’s victory in limiting the government’s proposed change, the outlook for higher education remains bleak. Strategically focusing resources on student scholarships while limiting funding to higher education institutions, postgraduate studies, and research, as well as programs promoting technology development, innovation, and international cooperation could be a sentence of death for these activities. In a time of neopopulism, higher education in Mexico seems unable to sustain an acceptable level of competitiveness and quality. ■

International Higher Education would like to thank the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) for its support of coverage of higher education in Africa and for its general support of our publication. CCNY has long recognized the importance of higher education in Africa and beyond, and this generosity significantly enables both our work as well as that of our partner at the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal in South Africa, home to the International Network for Higher Education in Africa (INHEA).