

Abstract

Latin America's research universities have underperformed, and the region has few world-class institutions. For Latin America to thrive in the twenty-first century, it needs high quality universities. We argue that this is in part because of the "Cordoba academic revolution" and its academic ideas. The great public universities in Latin America need reform.

Why Latin America Needs World-Class Universities

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Along with Africa, Latin America is the continent with the fewest top quality research-intensive universities. No Latin American university is listed in the top 100, and relatively few Latin American scholars and scientists are found among the most highly cited academics. Latin America represents 8.5 percent of the world population and produces 8.7 percent of the planet's GDP, but its universities account for only 1.6 percent of the top 500 institutions in the Shanghai ranking and less than 1.5 percent of the top 400 in the *Times Higher Education* ranking. This is a serious deficiency if the continent wants to produce quality research and innovation and share in the science-driven progress of the twenty-first century, especially in the present times of pandemic.

One of the main reasons is the underperformance of the great public universities that emerged from the "Cordoba higher education revolution" of 1918. It is worth examining why this is the case as a prerequisite to improvement.

The Ideals and Realities of the "Cordoba" Universities

The Cordoba revolution, started in Argentina in 1918 by students eager to democratize and modernize the university, led to the development of large public comprehensive universities throughout the continent and cemented the model of public higher education up to the present, making change very difficult.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the Cordoba principles can be summarized in the following way. Universities have an important role to play, educating students who can participate in nation-building and providing research and service to contribute to national development efforts. With the ideal of providing equal access, universities do not charge tuition and generally admit students based on transparent and common criteria (either secondary school completion or competitive university entrance examinations). As a protection from authoritarian regimes, universities should be autonomous: free of direct government control, with academic freedom guaranteed, but at the same time funded by the state. Internally, universities should be governed democratically—including faculty, students, and sometimes administrative personnel involved in decision-making and electing key academic leaders.

Throughout Latin America, public universities influenced by the Cordoba model came to dominate academe and remain the key institutions today, largely unchanged in the past century. Even with massification, the growth of the private sector (in many Latin American countries, more than half of the enrollments are in private higher education), and considerable institutional diversification, the "Cordoba universities" remain the gold standard. Several have become megauniversities, and many are the most prominent producers of locally relevant research in the country. For example, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the largest in the region, has 350,000 students, some in affiliated secondary schools. The University of Buenos Aires (UBA) enrolls 309,000 students.

The situation has been further exacerbated by low levels of public funding for higher education in most Latin American countries, lack of long-term continuity in national higher education policies due to political instability, and sometimes negative views toward the scientific mission of universities, as illustrated by the adversary policies of the Bolsonaro administration in Brazil.

The Governance Challenges of the Cordoba Universities

The case of the University of São Paulo, Brazil's top university, illustrates well the governance limitations of many public universities in Latin America, unable to evolve rapidly with the flexibility characterizing flagship institutions elsewhere. It has the highest number of top-rated graduate programs in the country, annually produces more PhD graduates than any US university, produces pertinent research for the country, and is the highest-financed public university in Latin America. Yet its ability to manage its resources is severely constrained by rigid civil service regulations. It has few linkages with the international research community; only 3 percent of its graduate students are from outside Brazil, and the majority of professors are themselves USP graduates.

The key missing element is a vision of excellence to challenge the status quo and transform the university. This is reinforced by a system of democratic election of university leaders promoting clientelism and frequent turnover of leaders, a large internal university council that makes the decision-making process unwieldy, and an egalitarian academic culture that frowns upon recognizing and rewarding outstanding researchers and teachers. In Brazil, as in many countries in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, the lack of strategic ambition for the development of higher education can often be observed as much at the national government level as among the university leadership.

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What Could Be Done

The transformation of Latin America's public universities would, without doubt, require a second "Cordoba revolution," driven by a bold vision from the academic community and substantial support and resources from government. This would involve the following changes:

- ▶ Substantial increases in public funding: Today, research funding is between 0.3 and 1 percent of annual GDP, way below the levels of investment in Nordic countries and East Asian nations.
- ▶ A continuous focus on national service and the UN Sustainable Development Goals: One of the strengths of the traditional "Cordoba universities" has been their commitment to national and social development. It is essential to retain this tradition and vision.
- ▶ A modern governance setup that allows for the professional selection of university leaders, internationally—a practice that, ironically, is acceptable when it comes to choosing the trainer of the national soccer team but is viewed as sacrilegious for universities. Universities are complex institutions that require a balance of professional and academic management and leadership.
- ▶ Autonomy and academic freedom, coupled with accountability to the government, the main funding source, and to society.
- ▶ Manageable size: Most world-class universities have enrollments of 40,000 students or fewer, and a fairly comprehensive array of academic programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- ▶ Interdisciplinarity: Flagship universities have structures and incentives that encourage and enable teaching and research across disciplines. This is notably lacking in many Latin American universities.
- ▶ Internationalization: Latin American universities generally lag behind their global peers in international connections, collaborative scholarship and research, and mobility. All aspects of internationalization are important, including increased attention to the use of English for international mobility and collaborative research, as long as it remains the main medium of global science and scholarship.

Our argument is not an academic exercise, but an invitation to governments and institutional leaders to think about the development role of their universities in the twenty-first century. Latin America deserves to have first-rate universities that can engage with global science through leading-edge fundamental and applied research, train ethically minded citizens and professionals, and contribute to the sustainable development of LAC societies. One thing is clear: However innovative and successful a century ago, the model of the traditional "Cordoba universities" is no longer adequate and should be revisited. Another revolution is needed, this time not a common template as Cordoba proposed, but rather in the form of innovative ideas and courageous initiatives suited to each country's national needs and aspirations. ▲

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