



# Transforming Higher Education in Latin America: What Stakeholders Say

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## Abstract

Latin American higher education is in urgent need of transformation as traditional paradigms still dominate. With the resumption of the annual conference on innovation in higher education in Monterrey, Mexico, educators from institutions throughout the region discovered and discussed new ideas and new technologies.

The CIEE (International Conference on Educational Innovation) is held annually on the campus of the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education (known as Tecnológico de Monterrey), Mexico. The event resumed in January 2023 after being paused for several years by the pandemic. Hundreds of educators from more than 30 countries attended in person, while thousands attended online. It is a good place to “take the pulse” of the region by observing the titles and subjects of keynotes and sessions and eavesdropping on conversations among attendees. Interest in new technologies was particularly palpable.

## New Technology: Friend or Foe?

There was much concern expressed about ChatGPT. Among speakers and participants, chatbots are currently seen more as a threat than a tool for teaching. There was much discussion about artificial intelligence (AI) and what artificial intelligence at all levels will mean for the future of higher education. Everyone recognizes the growth of AI but few understand it. There are more questions than answers.

One could not help but register the plethora of for-profit vendors participating as exhibitors, sponsors, or offering sessions that were a mix of useful data and self-promotion. Innovation in higher education is often conflated with the use of new technologies. In addition to that, there is an ever-growing business sector prepared to sell universities technology of all kinds, from learning management platforms to software and gadgets that will expand one’s reach into new realities. Participants crowded around exhibitors’ booths each time there was a demonstration. Clearly there is interest in learning more about what these new programs can offer. While it is easy to be cynical about the growth of the commercial sector, new technologies will open important opportunities for universities worldwide.

Keynote speakers emphasized that technology alone will not improve the quality of higher education, but it does introduce some very exciting possibilities. The Tecnológico de Monterrey has been on the forefront of technological innovation for decades and continues to lead the region, if not the hemisphere. Imagine having Isabel Allende as a guest speaker in a class in Monterrey without requiring her to leave her home in San Francisco. The Tecnológico de Monterrey’s experiment with holograms made this possible. Not only was her image present in Mexico, but she could make eye contact and interact personally with individual students. This technology would allow Ms. Allende to be present in multiple classrooms in multiple countries at the same time, potentially providing institutions with access to talent and expertise around the world with a fraction of the investment necessary to fund travel.

## Transformation, Yes: But What and How?

It was clear that trends and issues discussed elsewhere in the world preoccupy educators in Latin America. The vocabulary of “active learning,” “adaptive learning,” “competency-based education,” etc., is familiar to everyone. There is a growing awareness of the potential of micro-credentials to bridge the gap between higher education and the labor market. The region is certainly aware of current and critical issues for higher education. The looming question is how to get from the status quo to where higher education needs to be.

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The traditional model of higher education—preparing university students with specific knowledge for a specific career—is less useful than in the past, yet it is still the dominant paradigm. The rigidity of the systems and lack of differentiation among institutions, regardless of whether they are in the private or public sector, hampers innovation. There were occasional references to micro-credentials and new short-term education cycles, but the discussions didn't go very deep.

Transformation is urgent, yet it inevitably takes place over time. It most certainly requires leadership with a vision to the future, but the process must be bottom-up as well as top-down. Faculty are a critical element in the change that is needed, but very few university teachers are currently prepared to address the trends that are weighing on the sector. The Tecnológico de Monterrey could be an important case study and reference for how transformation takes place. Support for change is available at multiple levels—workshops, mentors, funds for redesigning courses and pedagogy, and importantly, recognition in performance reviews for the willingness to try out new ideas. Grants encourage experimentation with innovative teaching strategies or technology. Progress and outcomes are measured. Successes are shared throughout the institution's multiple campuses and published in peer-reviewed journals. Meanwhile, the institution's leadership continues to visit campuses throughout the world to benchmark against global standards and trends. International experience is adapted to the unique circumstances and mission of the Tecnológico de Monterrey to ensure that change remains relevant to the public the institution serves. An important lesson here is that the goal is not to imitate what other countries are doing but rather to use the experience of others as a reference.

Transforming the higher education sector will be an enormous challenge for a multitude of reasons. Not least among these reasons is limited resources. Inflation continues to plague much of Latin America and (for the most part) new technologies must be purchased from the Global North in dollars or euros. While the Tecnológico de Monterrey and several other institutions in the region are forging ahead, resources to invest in technology, infrastructure, and professional development are mostly limited in both private and public sectors. While the ubiquity of the internet helped Latin America to connect with other regions, further and significant investment in technology will be needed in the short-term for more significant innovation and progress going forward.

Resources will remain a challenge but strategic partnerships with international universities and private enterprise may help to mediate the cost of new investment. The labor market depends on the output of higher education, and the private sector has made very little investment in the sector until now. Relationships with industry must be cultivated, and mutual interests identified and pursued. And then, there are all those for-profit vendors out there who should be interested in cultivating future customers; they would be well served to build market share by helping institutions with the initial purchase of their products. ▲

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