

**Enrollment Competition,
Accreditation, and the Private-Public Market in Mexico**

JUAN CARLOS SILAS CASILLAS

Juan Carlos Silas Casillas is a professor at ITESO, the Guadalajara Jesuit University, Mexico. E-mail: silasjc@iteso.mx.

IHE publishes occasional articles from PROPHE, the Program for Research on Private Higher Education, headquartered at the University at Albany. See <http://www.albany.edu/>.

After decades in which Mexico experienced strong private growth and institutional diversification, the new century has brought even greater complexity. Changing patterns between and within the private and public higher education sectors have brought, among other things, intense market competitiveness in student recruitment.

Accreditation has assumed a rising role as a signal of institutional legitimacy, since it is carried out by independent agencies that highlight the cohesiveness of the programs or the solidness of the academic structure based on preset processes. Accreditation is assumed as a synonym of quality.

The battle for market-share with its corresponding accreditation role, is being waged over a major range of the system—public and mid-profile private

institutions. These institutions must fight for their enrollment applications under great pressure. This leaves mostly aside the elite institutions, which are always in great demand, attract the most privileged candidates, and have little need to further legitimize themselves. Also, “demand-absorbing” institutions, which simply depend on demand, continue to exceed good higher education supply; these institutions thus require little effort to recruit relative students. But the public and mid-profile private institutions that do have to fight for enrollment constitute the main part of the system. This enrollment comes mostly from the lower middle class, often first- or second-generation students, almost always with desires to join the job market at a high level. Both the private and public institutions are fighting mostly for this same pool of students.

This rather unexpected situation of intense competition seems to have resulted from two principal causes. One is the expanded quality-assurance effort by the Ministry of Education. As in other countries, concern has increased for decades about meeting minimum academic standards, amid sharply growing enrollment and both institutional and program proliferation. The government realizes that the market dynamics it favors require regulation. The other cause lies in the growth of customer-driven expectations. College goers and their families increasingly realize that they cannot simply depend on all institutions, providing learning experiences and degrees that work in the increasingly competitive job market. Accreditation is a logical response to the pressures from both government and prospective students.

A BEWILDERING PANORAMA OF PROGRAMS

The rising consumer anxiety is exacerbated by a bewildering proliferation of programs. It is not just the number of programs but the impossibility of judging among so many that go under essentially similar names. A look at the data on enrollment and programs offered in many *licenciatura* (first-degree university) fields shows that the bulk of public and private institutions, in spite of the obvious differences in their funding and infrastructure, have similarities in their curriculum and recruitment. These programs tend to target the service sector of the economy with its pressing demand for university-trained graduates.

It may seem counterintuitive that public universities would fight for market share and make recruitment pitches on a jobs basis. After all, the traditional Mexican and Latin American notion was that public institutions would train professionals in diverse areas of knowledge and, therefore, meet the needs of society and national development. Competition and advertising were not central to that conception. Why should public institutions waste their time creating attractive new names for traditional offerings and strive to showcase their programs as innovative in content and delivery mode? Much of the response stems from the intense challenge from the mid-profile private institutions. Public universities do not feature relaxed recipients of an unquestioning and eager pool of students. Established public institutions—such as, ITSON in the state of Sonora—place newspaper ads; and the large state university in Jalisco—Universidad de Guadalajara—sets up information booths in shopping malls or “plazas.” It is not just private entrepreneurial institutions that give away “trinkets” at recruitment fairs or stands in shopping malls.

ACCREDITATION AND THE MARKET

Such program offerings and advertisements are overwhelming for many students and families. The avalanche of information is confusing for those who eagerly seek a rational basis for their choices. In this setting, families make decisions based on three elements (other than just location): (1) market image, brochures, media presence, and other marketing manifestations; (2) pricing, including schemes for special deals in monthly peso payments; and (3) the use of accreditations as a sign of quality and an element of legitimation.

This third element seems crucial in the confusing scenario since the Ministry of Education has modified its role—from a provider of access to an evaluator who condemns low performance and rewards higher performance. The ministry has been targeting quality as its main goal and accreditation as the authentic way to prove quality has been achieved (or at least that the institution is striving for it). Public and mid-profile private institutions are understandably engaged in this “accreditation competition”—public universities in order to prove their continuing worth and private institutions to showcase themselves as reliable option. Elite institutions, focused on privileged students, also seek accreditation but not mainly for marketing strategies; demand-absorbing institutions do not (or cannot) make accreditation a major pursuit.

The role of accreditation seems to be crucial in the public and mid-profile private institutions—not only to achieve higher levels of performance but also showcasing themselves as legitimated by an external authority. But the accreditation process does not involve one clear route. Both institutions and programs can seek accreditation, from among many grantors: US accreditation agencies, the national federation of private institutions, the national association

of universities, or a host of professional associations. They can seek it through different mixes of basic quality or salesmanship and persuasion, through copying accredited programs or innovation. What these institutions cannot do is to ignore the increased pressures in order to sell themselves in an increasingly competitive private-public marketplace.