

The Public University in Argentina: Both Inefficient and Ineffective?

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During the presidency of Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1955), Argentina implemented an open-admissions policy for all public universities. All aspirants holding a secondary degree were admitted. In addition, tuition was totally free. As a result of this free-for-all education, an enrollment explosion followed. Although both measures were suspended from time to time, particularly when a new Military Junta took power, the model was finally consolidated in 1984—determining the current dynamics of student flows today. Unsurprisingly, this open policy has had its dark side. Alarming attrition rates and a low number of graduates portray a public university that is both inefficient and ineffective.

AN EASY-TO-ENTER MECHANISM

Today, 54 national universities enroll almost 1.4 million students (79.5% of total enrollment, by 2010); each university is free to determine its own admissions process. With different types of remedial courses shaped by the characteristics and needs of each institution, basically all aspirants carrying a secondary school diploma are admitted. In addition, tuition remains totally free at the

undergraduate level. Thus, with this logic, candidates are not challenged to make their best effort, neither intellectually nor financially, to get place at the most prestigious national institutions. In other words, regardless of their academic performance candidates may enter any public institution and enroll in almost any desired field of study. However, this permissive admissions policy has serious consequences.

The heavy load of an open-admission model must be taken into account, since Argentina lacks a standard and common final examination for high school graduates to control for quality. This situation puts an extra pressure onto the system, particularly when the average high school student lacks the basic skills to succeed in higher education. According to the last Program for International Student Assessment, in 2009 Argentina ranked 58 among 65 countries, confirming that the gap in performance between the higher and lower achievers is one of the largest among participating nations. So it is not surprising that only a small portion of students are able to complete their university education.

AN INEFFICIENT AND INEFFECTIVE UNIVERSITY

On average, only 22 percent of all students at national institutions complete their degrees. In comparison, the private sector shows more efficient graduation rates (35%). Higher out-of-pocket and opportunity costs and better-organized program of studies in the private sector encourage students to complete their degrees within a shorter time. In the public sector, however, it is likely that violation of internal rules also contributes to the problem. Although the Higher Education Law of 1995 mandates that all students must complete at least two courses per year to maintain their enrollment status, in reality it is likely that 27

percent of the student body does not complete a single course during the academic year. This increases to 41 percent, based on those who took fewer than 2 courses during the period. Unsurprisingly, this “permissive university” allows Argentina to have the highest, gross-enrollment university rate in Latin America. On the other hand, the country graduates only 2.4 students per 1,000 inhabitants, well below more efficient systems in the region.

Although some public universities’ graduation rates are more comparable by international standards (where around 50% of freshmen complete their university education), others present alarmingly low-graduation rates. In effect, in more than one-third of all publics, drop-out rates are above 80 percent. In part, this uneven performance is most likely due to the fact that some institutions are more selective in the admission of students to more demanding careers. By distributing lower-achievers to less academically demanding programs, some universities have been able to reduce the number of dropouts. Also, some remedial courses have proven as efficient, especially in smaller classes, where a student has more contact with a tutor. Additionally, some public institutions are expanding the number of shorter programs, to increase the number of graduates. In this sense, they tend to behave as nonuniversity institutions in order to address the dropout dilemma.

THE EFFICIENT NONUNIVERSITY AS PART OF THE SOLUTION

By contrast, a rising proportion of students now enroll in nonuniversity institutions, a phenomenon that has decreased the national drama of low graduation rates. These institutes offer two- and three-year programs in areas such as Web technology and technical education. Also, they are responsible for

graduating more than 70 percent of all primary and secondary teachers. They have also proven to be more efficient than the national university.

These *institutos terciarios* (tertiary institutes) enroll 691,000 students, or 30 percent of all postsecondary enrollees, but produce almost the same number of graduates as the universities. When factoring in these institutions, Argentina is actually more effective in the production of human capital. The tertiary institutes effectively bring graduation in the Argentine higher education system up to par with neighboring countries.

The higher efficiency rate of the tertiary institutes rests on both academic and organizational factors. First, academic programs are shorter and require less-previous academic preparation. Second, by offering smaller classes than universities, these institutes allow a closer interaction between students and professors. Also, tertiary institutions were conceived as an extension of secondary schools. In this sense, they offer a “friendlier environment,” and require fewer adjustments in order to succeed.

CONCLUSION

Although the national university in Argentina prides itself on socially equitable admissions, it has also proven to be both inefficient (judged by high-attrition rates) and ineffective (low proportion of graduates in comparison to other countries in the region) in the production of human capital. Even without admissions requirements or tuition, there is in fact strong selectivity evident in the progression from first to subsequent years of most degree programs. If Argentina wants to truly achieve its objective of a postsecondary system that is socially just and equitable, higher education policy must be redefined. Beyond

the urgent need for reform at the secondary level to better prepare students for postsecondary study, tertiary institutes and universities must act as complementary entities. The objective must be to achieve a better articulation between both types of institutions (currently almost nonexistent), helping less prepared students to make a smooth transition from secondary to tertiary education with more options.