

Special Focus: A Decade of Reform in Latin America

During the past decade, Latin American higher education has undergone significant change and reform. Democratic governments replaced military dictatorships in much of the continent, and a spirit of innovation can be seen in higher education. Continued expansion has forced change as well, and private higher education has emerged as a major phenomenon. There are, of course, significant variations among countries. This special focus section looks at trends in Latin America as well as case studies of several key countries. The concept for this section was suggested by Rollin Kent, to whom we are indebted.

Reform: Latin America in the 1990s

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Reform has been a preponderant theme in Latin American higher education in the 1990s, gaining a centrality greater than it had had in the region since the 1960s. Although the new reform orientation could not match the heady optimism of the earlier period, it marked a reversal from the more besieged mentality saddling many countries under military rule or suffering economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s.

Reforming Again

Some key features of the 1990s reform in Latin American higher education are unexceptional when viewed against the history of reform in many policy areas in many regions, yet they are worth underscoring by way of general introduction. Most are interrelated. The reform is amorphous, with no one clear blueprint and no clear starting point—or projected endpoint. The 1990s reform has some roots in earlier reforms and varies significantly across countries. The motivations and driving forces for reforms, even when we speak of common reforms, are diverse. Nonetheless, in much of the region there is an identifiable reform core that substantially overlaps with a powerful international reform agenda. This agenda is very controversial and there are counteragendas—some aimed at blocking elements of reform, others at achieving a contrary reform agenda. The rhetoric and even efforts far outpace tangible results, which, in any event, are difficult to identify or measure precisely. But, the typical scholarly focus (followed in this article) on large, national public-policy reforms, highly publicized and debated, substantially underestimates the degree of reform undertaken and achieved both before and during the period in question.

Allowing that motivations vary, we can nevertheless identify the principal driving forces behind the most dominant cross-national 1990s reform agenda. Nearly ubiquitous and certainly powerful is fierce rejection of the status quo. This is, of course, a common driving force for reform. But even the 1960s reform did not stem from quite

such a fierce disenchantment. While that status quo was criticized, it was also widely deemed simply too small and “pre-reform”; in contrast, the 1990s reform agenda was premised on the view that much of the effort and growth in preceding decades had been misguided. It is notable that this negativism characterizes the influential work of leading Latin American scholars of higher education. Less strikingly, but perhaps more importantly, this attitude increasingly characterizes the work of the World Bank, which has assumed a more active role in higher education in the region than ever before. Over the decades, the Inter-American Development Bank has been more influential, and in 1997 the IDB produced its first strategy paper laying out its views on desirable reform—and its readiness to support such reform.¹

Aside from such visible international “pushes,” there is the more diffuse but still potent influence of international examples and incentives. The broad outlines of reform in Latin America resemble those found in both more- and less-developed regions. Much the same can be said of general political and economic trends (e.g., less reliance on state funds) in Latin America and elsewhere.

Changing the Functions

The reform agenda reflects an important, if partial, change in the underlying notions about higher education’s role in development. In general terms, the agenda treats higher education increasingly as a dependent variable, something that must “fit in” with dominant political and economic trends. This marks a turn away from conceptions of a “classic” university that should use its autonomy and expertise to influence the course of development, to create and spread ideas, consciousness, and culture. The new reform rarely looks for universities to lead their nations in such ways, and that helps explain why this reform is bitterly denounced in many university circles.

Promoters of the new agenda deny that higher education, rhetoric aside, has in fact been fulfilling such a vaunted leadership role. Dismissing that “myth,” they depict most of higher education as economically, politically, and even academically marginal, and as too inward-looking and self-interested. Where higher education has an important impact on society, that impact is more negative than positive, at least when one considers the public cost of funding higher education. Thus, for example, the charge is that higher

education actually contributes to socioeconomic inequality. In the more moderate terms of the IDB paper, Latin American higher education is granted important functions in academic and national leadership and certainly in training people and doing research in the professions—but in most of the region higher education actually does much less of this than it pretends to do.

A related point is that most traditional conceptions of higher education's functions, academic and professional, in fact characterize only some of the region's universities, whereas other institutions are universities in name only, with little true research and few adequately qualified full-time professors (or students, for that matter). Meanwhile, an increasing but still too small percentage of students are in nonuniversity institutions of one sort or another (e.g., technical institutes), whose proper functions are far different from those of classical universities. For example, they may provide a rather narrow job-oriented training. An important part of a public policy agenda would be to establish the diverse functions required of a modern higher education system and then to promote the higher education diversification suited to those functions. This would also then involve decreasing subsidies and eliminating rules that encourage institutions to pretend to be classical universities when they in fact do not perform the associated research, teaching, and intellectual functions.

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Rationalization

Key public policy reforms thus aim at some sort of “rationalization,” a process of making higher education more effective and efficient in serving certain desired political and economic functions. Curbing public subsidies is usually considered crucial. Whatever this may mean in terms of total expenditures, the policy envisions diminishing the state's responsibility to finance growth and ongoing activities. Instead, private financing should partly replace public financing. Moreover, public financing should concentrate on areas important to the public interest that cannot be covered by private financing—and should target places that truly perform well. Such an approach would involve “accountability” in place of a system of automatic funding, in which universities are allowed to choose their own course, free from evaluation. There may in fact be some de-regulation, but with a contingent autonomy: institutions can run themselves but governments (and others) become freer to pick and choose which ones they will support. Paying

students would also be a key to such a system, characterized by choice and competition, and a few countries have made the politically difficult move to impose tuition at public universities (e.g. Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico).

The idea of accountability often means increased efforts to establish some sort of evaluation or accreditation system. Such steps, too, have proved to be politically difficult and have raised questions about autonomy. Among the tricky issues are those concerning the mix between national systems and evaluation processes that include multiple actors in the marketplace, decisions on what institutions to attend, whom to fund, whom to hire, and so forth. The mix also reflects a broader tension between centrally run reform—aimed at gaining control over inputs, outputs, and quality—versus more decentralized market dynamics that seek results more through competition.

There are also government initiatives that foster competition in their search for improved performance and accountability. The idea is to reserve special funds for institutional innovation or achievements, perhaps run by national public offices with some autonomy from central ministries, as in Argentina. Brazil has been the leader in such evaluated public funding at the level of graduate education and research, but other countries are attempting to follow. Another important alternative to central, automatic subsidies lies in the increasing use of contract funding: the government purchasing a particular service or piece of research or training that institutions, often special research and service centers, can provide. And several countries have broken with the idea of standardized, civil-service-like remuneration of professors (by time and rank), setting aside special rewards for the most productive.

Finally, quick mention must be made of private higher education, which holds roughly 40 percent of the region's enrollments. Whether in teaching institutions or applied research centers, the private sector provides much of the thrust of rationalization. Private higher education is distinguished by limited public subsidies, tuition, institutional diversification, competition, emphasis on the job market and responsiveness to a changing economy, and other alternatives both to the classical university and to the public university pretending to be a classical university.

An attraction for states aiming at neoliberal reform is that a good deal of such rationalization can come with minimal investment of public policy and money, a good example of reform largely outside the realm of macropublic policy. But such reform naturally raises questions about the deleterious as well as positive effects of rationalization, and introduces the issue of how and to what extent the state should regulate higher education. ■

Note

1. Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), *Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: Strategy Paper* (Washington, D.C.: IDB, 1997).