

## Argentina: Between Tradition and Modernization?

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Argentina's peculiar public university model may evoke as much horror as admiration, but no one can deny that it is almost unique: great academic and institutional autonomy; a democratic tripartite university governance structure, composed of professors, alumni, and students; periodic competitions to select professors; a free tuition policy; and a budget decided and allocated each year by the parliament. These were the main elements of the university of the golden years—a model that is today in crisis.

The last decade has been a real challenge for the universities. In a context of scarce resources and high demands for access, universities have had to contend with maintaining their traditional character or following international trends. Today, Argentina's public universities are confronted by serious problems, and the institutions seem to be unable to solve them without external aid. The main challenge for the new government is to decide what role to play in this situation.

#### *A Decade of Modernization?*

Between 1989 and 1999 Argentine university policies were marked by the concentration of resources at the federal level in order to foster major reforms. Throughout this period of financial constraints, the government applied policies associated with international trends in higher education, supported to a significant degree by international agencies. For instance, the government attempted to design a performance-indicator-based budget allocation system—with no success. It also encouraged, with good results, extensive diversification of the graduate tier, which improved the financial position of institutions in many cases. The government also created a voluntary national system of incentives to professor and researchers. Many full-time faculty members received a significant increase in their meager salaries after fulfilling specific criteria for academic productivity. Another significant change was the creation of a national agency for evaluation and accreditation of the universities.

The public universities were organized as a system, with a powerful center supplying resources and in charge of implementing the new policies. It can be said that the re-

forms were focused more on the goals of the whole system than on those of each institution. Statistical data on the university system were compiled and published; and there were attempts at institutional coordination through the creation of intermediate bodies. However, these changes were made without the genuine support of the universities, which found themselves negotiating from a position of financial weakness. In addition, the changes were not accompanied with an adequate increase in the budget. Any increase in resources for the sector in those 10 years was absorbed by the growth in enrollments and the creation of new institutions—which produced the rise in the fixed costs of the system.

The university sector as a whole took a defensive attitude in response to the attacks on its autonomy. In a context of financial crisis, the institutions neglected their internal academic and administrative operations, as well as the task of institutional development.

#### *Current Government Policy*

The administration that assumed power in 1999 recently announced its goals in higher education. In contrast to its predecessors, the current government has the potential to create a consensus with the university sector and enjoys the political support of the students and many university presidents. Moreover, the government has decided to use the parliament to enact its policies.

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Contrary to what one might expect, Argentine higher education policy for the coming period will follow the international trends of quality improvement, efficiency, and equity. As a central goal, the government will create a mechanism of resource allocation among the universities based on equity criteria and incentives for the institutions that show productivity improvements. It has also announced accountability mechanisms for university planning as a counterpart to autonomy and academic freedom. The government also plans to evaluate graduates and to continue with the centralized program of incentives for professor-researchers. Another goal is to look for alternative sources of funding, while retaining free tuition. Government will create mechanisms whereby students and graduates pay society back for the services they receive. Students will have to join a social service program, and graduates will be re-

quired to fulfill the terms of the “intergenerational solidarity act,” which involves financing scholarships for working-class students.

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#### *Future Challenges*

Without a doubt, a higher education policy defined at central levels of government will be required to rescue Argentina’s universities from the current situation. The government will have to face structural problems affecting teaching—such as inadequate academic salaries, which rep-

resent between 85 and 90 percent of each university’s budget. Another issue to be revisited is the contest system of faculty recruitment, a tremendous tool that today requires greater transparency and efficacy. The relationship between the university system and its parts—the institutions—also needs to be reexamined. A concern pointed out by several international specialists is that pressures toward greater institutional uniformity through rigid criteria or formulas may limit innovation by reducing the wealth of institutional diversity.

At present, the public autonomous universities are facing difficult circumstances. It is possible that the government will move to limit autonomy in an effort to ensure accountability and a manageable academic structure. We believe that the Argentine public university is a central part of the academic system and that it plays a central role in research as well as in economic development. Weakening the public university would be a mistake. ■

## Impediments to Private Higher Education in Uruguay

### **Warren Roane**

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The Republic of Uruguay is the administrative center of MERCOSUR, the South American economic consortium consisting of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay. This small country of three million people needs to prepare itself for this task, at a time when its only public university has been paralyzed by debate over the purpose of the university. Although Uruguay only began to experiment with the privatization of higher education in 1985, the Ministry of Education is contemplating the recognition of more than 30 private universities. These institutions are quite diverse in origins and offerings and already account for more than 10 percent of postsecondary degrees awarded annually.

The first private institution to be recognized, Catholic University, grew out of Jesuit outreach. Some institutions, like ORT, developed by building on its longtime programs in technology. Still others were formed as alternatives to the public university by disgruntled faculty at the national university—albeit while keeping their tenured positions at that university. However, most of the new institutions focus on a particular field—computer science or the MBA—and seek recognition only as a way to enhance the job prospects of graduates. Such programs are also offered by universities in Spain, Chile, and Argentina.

Uruguay is one of the last countries in the Western

Hemisphere to offer private higher education despite its historic reputation of being a modern (and model) state. Three key factors have impeded the growth of private universities: the low impact of the Catholic Church on society, a history of educational excellence, and state-imposed restrictions.

#### *The Catholic Church*

The Catholic Church has had less of an impact on Uruguay than on other Latin American countries. Absolute separation of church and state is a long-revered tradition in Uruguay. Only in modern times has the Catholic Church paid attention to this small nation; previously, it was considered an annex of the Argentine church. For example, the first archbishop was not named until as late as 1853. The first (and only) Catholic university was opened in 1985, whereas many Latin American countries had Catholic “universities” soon after the time of the conquistadors. Some see the opening of Catholic University, at the time of the dictatorship (1973–1985), as a response to the pressure of special interest groups as well as the revenge of the military on the “liberal” public university. Though it sees itself as the “mother” of the national university, only recently has the church reclaimed tertiary education.

#### *Educational Quality*

A second impediment to privatization is that there simply has been no need for other universities in the past, due to the small population size and the general satisfaction with the national university. However, public opinion on the quality of the public school system and the national university has changed dramatically. Now, despite the historic monopoly of the public university, a growing number of students and parents are “voting with their feet” and pur-