

hinder student mobility within Germany—depending on the state, the higher education institution, and possibly the subject. However, eastern German states following a tuition-free policy will profit from some student migration from states that will demand tuition fees.

The establishment of an elite sector within the German higher education system on the basis of the “initiative for excellence” as well as other complications may lead to a further differentiation of institutions and tuition fees, as well as reducing intra-German mobility. It is expected that universities succeeding in the initiative will eventually ask for considerably higher fees than other universities.

Universities counting themselves as part of the elite group will restrict access and heighten selectivity. Other institutions will follow this approach, because they fear being left with students rejected as unqualified by the elite universities. The principles of free access and students choosing their higher education institutions will be reversed.

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Presidential Politics and Higher Education Reforms in Mexico

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The Vicente Fox administration is coming to an end. In 2000, Fox was the first president elected from a political party other than PRI (the Institutional Revolutionary Party), which ruled Mexico for more than 75 years. When PAN (the National Action Party) won the last elections many expectations were created about Fox’s presidency, given the victory of a different political party.

Discussing Fox’s legacy in higher education seems pertinent at this moment. Mexican presidential elections took place on July 2nd, and the conservative candidate was declared the victor in a disputed decision. This article discusses the extent to which a political transition influences higher education reform in a Latin American country. This analysis seems necessary due to the various political changes that have occurred

on the continent recently. There is no intention, however, to simplify the complex task of reforming higher education institutions.

MAIN INITIATIVES IN THE FOX ADMINISTRATION

The four principal higher education initiatives emphasized during the six years of Fox’s government include: the Integral Program for Institutional Strengthening (PIFI—all acronyms in this article are based on the Spanish names); the National Program of Higher Education Scholarships (PRONABES); the Extraordinary Funds to Support State Public Universities (FAEUP); and the creation of polytechnic and intercultural universities. The first three programs basically offer extraordinary funds at different levels: faculty, research, infrastructure, graduate education, and low-income students, among others; the fourth initiative stresses the creation of other tertiary education alternatives.

Examining the focus of the Fox administration’s main initiatives on higher education shows limited policies that have neglected some of the major national problems in this sector. In the best scenario, some of Fox’s main policies represent just a continuation of previous programs—not necessarily a wrong approach; however, in fact most of the main problems in Mexican higher education were not addressed after the political transition, which reveals the challenge of improving higher education institutions, solving their problems, and enhancing their effectiveness.

PIFI is perhaps the best example of Fox’s approach. Its main purpose has been to integrate other government funding programs to support higher education institutions. PIFI includes the following programs: PROMEP (the Faculty Improvement Program), established by President Zedillo in 1996 to fund professional and academic faculty development; FOMES (the Fund for the Modernization of Higher Education), created under the Salinas administration in 1990 to “modernize” higher education institutions; and FIUPEA (the Fund for Public Universities with Accredited and Evaluated Programs), established to finance universities whose programs have been accredited by the corresponding national boards. PIFI includes other programs for improving infrastructure, modernizing administration, and supporting graduate education (a continuation of a program cosponsored by the National Council for Science and Technology). In sum, innovation does not characterize PIFI.

In this scenario, perhaps the most original and significant initiative, officially promoted within the Fox administration is the higher education scholarship program (PRONABES). In 2001/02, 44,400 scholarships were awarded; in 2005/06 it is estimated that 150,000 students of low socioeconomic status will benefit from the program. First-year students at public institutions (private institutions are not allowed to participate) receive about US\$67 dollars per year; second-year, about US\$79; third-year, US\$89; and fourth-year, US\$144. These scholarships seem inadequate, but no doubt they have benefit-

ed a significant number of underprivileged students. Perhaps the high profile of PRONABES has to do with its representing the Fox administration's only distinctive higher education program.

Polytechnic universities and those named "intercultural universities" have been officially viewed as other "original" Fox initiatives, although their identity has not been clarified. Approximately 15 polytechnic universities have been created, but it is unclear what constitutes the main differences between the polytechnic universities and the technological institutes, especially in terms of missions and goals. Some differences

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exist in the administration of these two types of institutions, but a more important task is to question the relevance of creating more institutions instead of seeking to improve the coordination and consolidation of the existing ones. Intercultural universities were created mainly to serve indigenous communities, but they cannot be judged as an original initiative since some indigenous universities were previously established in Mexico. Intercultural universities attempt to offer programs that differ from those of classic universities (i.e., language and culture, alternative truism, sustainable development, intercultural communication, or ecological agriculture). The project seems interesting but remains incomplete. Initially, Fox planned to create 10 campuses but only 5 were operating in 2005.

URGENT ISSUES

Certainly, the Fox administration introduced a number of isolated efforts—some more successful than others—to improve tertiary-level education. Unfortunately, the absence of a coordinated plan to address the main problems of Mexican higher education seems Fox's chief legacy. Some of these issues require solutions.

Access to higher education. This issue is especially critical among the poorest and most marginalized population. Two relevant aspects related to access concern the demographic change Mexico is experiencing (the rapid increase of the college-age population) and the notable growth of the private sector, which means more attention needs to focus on education provided.

Evaluation. The country needs to undertake an immediate debate on the evaluation of institutions—both the positive and

negative effects. The next government cannot consider evaluation as something inevitable. Certainly, evaluation has been useful in many aspects, but it has also created serious problems.

Institutional equity. Mexico is one of the most socioeconomically inequitable countries worldwide. Inequality affects every scope, including higher education institutions. Instead of looking to compensate inequalities, some governmental policies have penalized less-privileged institutions. The funding created during the Fox administration is a positive move, but more coordinated efforts are needed.

Coordination of subsystems and institutions. Federal and state higher education needs to improve serious policies promoting academic mobility and academic transfer (i.e., confirmation of credits or creation of an academic national retirement fund). The lack of harmonization among Mexican institutions inhibits the better use of their resources.

Cross-border higher education. The Mexican government has not promoted the necessary debate among key actors—university rectors, experts, stakeholders, and state and federal staff members—on cross-border higher education, commercialization of services, and other modalities, as well as developing subsequent actions. Today, at least four international for-profit providers have gained presence in Mexico (Laureate Education Inc., Apollo Group Inc., Alliant International Universities, and Informatics Holding); and more international providers are expected to be established in the country in the next years. No nonprofit international providers have yet been established.

Other relevant topics that should be the focus of an integrated reform include the absence of coordination between higher education and the science and technology sectors; and the problems regarding institutional autonomy, accountability, decentralization, and financing. Solving these problems involves not only political will but also being committed to provide the necessary economic resources for the higher education sector.

In the context of a new geopolitical panorama in Latin America, the recent victories by Evo Morales and Michelle Bachelet in Bolivia and Chile, respectively; and previous results in Brazil (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva), Argentina (Néstor Kirchner), Venezuela (Hugo Chávez) and Uruguay (Tabaré Vázquez) place on the table the debate of governments positioned as leftist and their possible impact on higher education reforms. The question is whether Mexico—as well as the other eight Latin American countries carrying out presidential elections this year—is going to succeed in debating and looking to transform the higher education sector independently of or relying on the political regime change. The missed opportunity in Fox's case might be taken up again by his successor, although the chances seem smaller if the winning candidate comes from the same political party and carries out a continuation of Fox's agenda. We will see the outcome in the near future. ■