



Venezuela: Universities at Risk in a Failed State

Juan Carlos Navarro

Abstract

Deep economic decline and a prolonged political crisis in Venezuela have had a negative impact on higher education institutions. The main public universities, in particular, have paid a heavy price as a consequence of their defense of democratic values and academic freedom, as they have been defunded by the government. Amid severe brain drain and political and economic distress, some positive signs provide reasons for hope, but no recovery can be anticipated.

Venezuela has been in the headlines for quite some time given a succession of several rather extreme events. Within a few years, over 6 million migrants—out of a population of 30 million—have exited the country. The percentage of the population living in poverty estimated by international institutions stood at no less than 85 percent in 2018. Hyperinflation has settled as a routine for a good number of years. The government is considered illegitimate by almost all liberal democracies around the world, including most Latin American countries. GDP estimates point to one of the steepest economic declines on record. The list could go on. The combined effect of developments like these have landed the country in the short list of fragile or failed states collected by organizations such as the World Bank, the Fund for Peace, and the OECD.

Such a damaging combination of economic and social decline, as well as political strife, has had a severe, albeit far less publicized, impact on institutions of higher education.

The Depth of the Crisis in Venezuelan Higher Education

Systematic information on all aspects of Venezuelan society is hard to get. The government has stopped publishing basic economic and social indicators for over a decade. But looking at some proxies may help document such impact. A fully credible estimate, several years old, was able to establish that more than half of the scientific researchers active in Venezuela, the vast majority employed at universities, had left for other countries. Another independent report asserts that the proportion of faculty members at public universities who have emigrated abroad or moved to private universities reached 40 percent by 2018. Although more recent estimates are not available, the situation has likely worsened, since the average monthly salary of a university professor in public universities was USD 15 per month in 2020. According to a rare official government document dated 2022, enrollments in public institutions of higher education (including universities and short-program technical institutes) registered a 25 percent decline by 2018, compared with its peak in 2008, in spite of the fact that inclusion in higher education is a top stated policy priority.

Indicators like those mentioned above speak of nothing short of a collapse of public higher education in Venezuela. The main traditional public universities, Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), Universidad del Zulia (LUZ), Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB), Universidad de Los Andes (ULA), and others still, have been for years the targets of large reductions in budget allocations, in favor of a new batch of massive new universities created by the successive Chavez administrations, with enrollments of over 100,000 students. Under the umbrella of the government initiative known as *Misión Sucre*, these new institutions were built with little regard for academic standards but were generously funded, while resources were being denied to the crown jewels of higher education in the country, home to the overwhelming share of STEM research. Overall enrollments grew rapidly between 2005 and 2012, only to decline afterward as the new universities revealed their weaknesses as vehicles for the labor market, and public universities reduced their academic offerings as a result of the lack of funds and a massive brain drain.

In addition to the loss of a critical mass of faculty mentioned above, the outcome of the crisis has been the ruin of physical infrastructure and the acute deterioration of teaching and research activities: There were never more than a few Venezuelan universities included in the *THE* ranking, but the single one remaining in the latest exercise (2021), ULA, lost about 400 places in the last four years. That same university was recently the subject of an article in *The New Yorker*, “Aging and Abandoned in Venezuela’s Failed State,”

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showing photos of emaciated senior professors whose salaries and pensions were insufficient for them to eat decently.

The Political Roots of the Crisis

From afar, it can be hard to understand how such unparalleled destruction of highly valuable academic assets could take place. On the ground, in Venezuela, the explanation is clear. Early in the first Chavez administration (inaugurated after a national election, in December 1998), universities gained prominence as sources of resistance to the gradual onset of authoritarian rule. In 2007, Hugo Chavez convened a national referendum for the reform of the constitution, most notably aimed at designating Venezuela as a socialist state. The government lost the referendum and students were at the forefront of the campaign to defeat the reform. Later, they would lead national street demonstrations against the Maduro administration in 2014 and 2017. At the same time, faculty, even if not united in opposing the regime, leaned clearly against the plans of the government and systematically elected university authorities not favored by the government authorities and committed to preserving academic freedom and political independence. All along, the regime's response was to consider universities primarily as part of the opposition, and then proceed to defund them. This stand-off continues today.

Venezuelan universities have thus paid a very heavy price for their defense of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and democracy.

Reasons for Hope

Yet, against all odds, public universities are still open, although they have not been able to keep up their historic levels of graduates and research output and have had to close quite a few programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Most of them have remained politically independent, i.e., academically and in terms of self-government and administration. The overall goal of the regime, taking over the reins of the main institutions, has proved elusive to this day. Meanwhile, expatriate researchers, some of them working at top level research laboratories around the world, have connected with their colleagues back home and provided support for remote advanced training and research.

Last, but not least, several private universities have preserved their academic and financial viability through strong support from private sponsors, without renouncing their autonomy. As in the case of leading institutions such as the Catholic University Andrés Bello (UCAB) or the Metropolitan University in Caracas (UNIMET), they have proactively adapted to the challenging environment by finding ways to retain academic talent, recruiting and financially supporting ever larger numbers of students in need of assistance, diversifying international alliances, and enhancing their engagement with their communities through innovative programs for K-12 schools, nontraditional students, and young entrepreneurs. They have also, to some extent, filled the vacuum of public statistics by becoming a key source of systematic information about the state of the country through social, economic, and political surveys.

In sum, the sharp economic decline and democratic backsliding in Venezuela have had a very negative effect on higher education, which seriously compromises the country's capabilities to face development challenges. This is happening at a time when advanced human capital is considered more important than ever before to secure economic growth, innovation, resilience in the face of emergencies—such as the recent pandemic, and equal opportunity for the new generations. While a vibrant discussion takes place around the world about the future of higher education in the digital age after the challenges represented by the pandemic, barely anybody at the major public universities in Venezuela has the time or the resources to get engaged—further amplifying the gap that separates them from universities in other countries.

Recovery will not be quick or easy. There is no sign, unfortunately, that it has even started, or that the current Maduro administration has any plan other than staying the current damaging course. ▲

Juan Carlos Navarro is an international expert in higher education, a former professor at several Venezuelan universities, and a former member of the National Council of Education in Venezuela. Email: Juancnm2020@yahoo.com.