# Public Universities in Mexico: The Politics of Public Policies

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After 15 years, the policies implemented to improve the quality of Mexican universities have achieved few of the promised results. In addition to many old problems, several new ones emerged. Enrollments represent 19.1 percent of the 20-to-24-year age group, far below the 37.1 percent average in countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The preparation level of graduates has not risen noticeably, and a substantial percentage of them are underemployed. Although graduation rates increased during the 1990s, they are still low (50 percent) and vary hugely among institutions (ranging from 9 percent to 100 percent). While some academic programs improved, many of the new ones that pop up every year seem completely improvised.

## Policy Design and Implementation

In 1989, the federal government launched evaluation and funding policies to improve the quality of public universities. The "evaluative state" and the "distant steering" approach seemed to have arrived in Mexico. However, the concept of quality has remained vaguely defined ever since. Evaluations focused mainly on a review of inputs rather than on an assessment of outputs.

During the second half of the 1990s an important shift occurred: the federal government focus shifted from a "distant steering" to a "planned intervention" mode. Policymakers assumed that most problems with universities were due to inadequate operating conditions that would have to be improved before better results could be achieved. Special programs, designed to address these conditions during 1990s, were brought together under the umbrella of Integral Programs for Institutional Development in 2001. The idea is that every academic program write its development plan to get federal funds, finance inputs, and obtain accreditation.

Even though accreditation influences the possibility of obtaining extra funding for public institutions, it is not mandatory and the government cannot shut down programs. The competition for these funds is based on proposals for improvement, not on performance. This policy produces dependency on the federal government because it encourages institutions to create demands but not to strengthen their regulative capacity or to become more efficient. Therefore, it remains unclear if quality has improved, even after years of increasing inputs.

Some evidence shows that special funds produce negative effects—such as compliance behavior, pretense, bureaucratization, and unattainable goals.

## The Political Context

The lack of improvement, however, cannot be attributed merely to errors in the design or implementation of policies. These policies, and policymakers, operate in a complex and changing political environment of both governments and universities.

A once pyramidal political structure, with the president and state governors at the top, has given way to a scenario of divided and juxtaposed governments. Executive powers no longer have majority backing in the now very active legislatures and where different parties occupy various levels of government. As governance used to be based on unwritten rules and party loyalty, in the new context it is unclear who is responsible for what.

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Within this changing context, the devolution of public functions to the state governments became an important issue. While the responsibility for education was transferred to them, most state governments lacked the capacity (political, technical, administrative, and financial) to tackle these new tasks.

As for higher education, intermediary bodies (State Planning Commissions for Higher Education) are supposed to coordinate and define the development of the system in each state, turning them into forums where rectors negotiate approval for new programs. New public programs have to be cofinanced (50 percent) by state governments. Nevertheless, the absence of approval by state governments only means that no additional funds will be allocated—not that the new programs are not allowed—because public universities can open any program they wish.

The impact of decentralization has been diverse. Some state governments reached agreements with institutions over desired development. In many other cases, governments face a complex and unplanned system of vested institutional interests. The situation becomes even more complicated if the governor has no majority in the local legislature that is responsible for funding decisions.

Generally, coordination among the different decision makers is flawed, often resulting in disregard for formal regulations. Rules are malleable, and decisions depend on the power of each actor within the political arena. Two decades ago, funding decisions about public universities depended mainly on the direct interaction between the federal government and university presidents. Now, state governors, federal government, and rectors may have their own agenda. In sum, the political context has become more complex, forcing rectors to play an

increasingly political role. This is not only due to the proliferation of actors but also to the loosely defined rules of the political game.

*Conclusion*

The resulting situation is paradoxical. The federal government is seeking to improve universities through a centralized planning process that rationalizes inputs. Far from being a neoliberal retreating state, the government is actively intervening in the operation of programs. This process has its pitfalls, because the government cannot impose compliance on autonomous universities; it can only induce them to comply by making special funds available. It can thus be said that the federal government lacks the capacity to regulate the public universities.

At the same time, the politically inspired agenda of decentralization leads to a situation in which existing government capacity is effectively undermined, by turning crucial decisions over to ill-prepared local governments. This invites rectors to engage in politics in order to obtain additional funds, instead of implementing educational policies.

The current paradox can be expressed as follows: if the federal government could design and create the public university sector, then what is the role of state governments? Or if state governments are in a better position to define local needs, then why introduce a national planning approach that does not take those needs into account?

# Myths and Realities of Distance Education in India

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The emergence of ICT (information and communications technology) in recent years has led to the concept of open and distance learning (ODL) as the panacea for the growth, cost reduction, and quality of higher education in India. Some people even seem to imagine that the new systems will replace

traditional campus-based education. A closer look at the purpose, clientele, costing, potential, and limitations of the technology should resolve the myths and realities concerning distance education.

*Myth 1: ODL Is the Only Way to Expand Higher Education in Developing Countries*

It should be noted that ODL and the traditional system differ in purpose and origin. Recognition of education's essential role in enhancing the citizenry has resulted in the development of a massive formal educational system. Young people devote almost one-fourth of their lives to full-time formal education, and the state and society are committed to providing traditional formal education. Formal education promotes the academic skills and competencies that are essential for further learning. ODL, however, cannot help to provide such serious training for the relevant age group.

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In India, distance learning (DL) evolved to cater to adults who were either left out of or dropped out of the formal system. ODL is just a variation of DL that offers greater flexibility, without an age limit or qualifying prerequisites. The demand for flexible forms of continuing education resulted from the changing contexts of rapid knowledge expansion and globalization. ODL thus functions as a parallel stream to the traditional universities. Purely distance education institutions appeared later.

*Myth 2: ODL Is Less Expensive Than Campus Learning*

The proponents of ODL assume that it has a larger potential reach through ICT than classrooms and will be cheaper. No authentic costing has yet been done for ICT-based ODL. Any well-designed ICT-based education should cost more as all the facilities are cost intensive, both for establishment and maintenance. Besides, the hardware will quickly become obsolete and the expense of frequent renewal will be prohibitive. Students may also need their own computers. Additional requirements include widespread Internet connectivity and broadband capacity—factors that depend on the national infrastructure. The system will need the support of technical personnel as well as specially trained academics. In a country like India, ICT-based ODL would require adequate support facilities at hundreds of study centers since not all distance learners could afford to have personal high-tech environments. It is unrealistic to expect the government to offer subsidies for adult learners. All the 120 ODL units in the country are self-supporting, except for the centrally funded Indira Gandhi National Open University.