

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Policies in Latin America: changes and continuities

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Latin American higher education has undergone a number of important transformations in recent decades. Although a close inspection of the current higher education developments in each country of the region might reveal substantial variations, common trends and reform processes have taken place all over Latin America in response to similar demands upon higher education and the adoption of analogous ideas and organizational forms (Balán, 2006). That is, even though the motivations and driving forces for higher education reforms in Latin American countries are diverse, Levy (1999) argues that 'there is an identifiable reform core that substantially overlaps with a powerful international reform agenda' (p. 10). Among the trends and processes characteristic of this reform agenda, one needs to consider the remarkable expansion of higher education enrollments and the subsequent multiplication and diversification of tertiary institutions, the decline of state subsidies accompanied by the advance of performance-based funding, the diversification of funding sources (including tuition fees and partnerships with business), the creation of quality assessment measures, the adoption of managerial practices and the increasing relevance of universities for economic growth based on their functions of knowledge production and dissemination (Yarzabal, 1999; Torres & Schugurensky, 2002).

Some Latin American scholars consider that those changes represent the superseding of the model which emerged from the 1918 Córdoba Reform Movement (CRM) and carried its influence on universities across the region for over sixty years (Bernasconi, 2007). The main features of this model included (a) academic autonomy and freedom from government control; (b) democratic co-governance through collective bodies formed by faculty, students, alumni and administrative staff; (c) full state funding; (d) democratization of access via degree programs with free tuition or with tuition at only a nominal rate; (e) the vital role of scientific research fostering national development; and (f) cultural diffusion and technical assistance to the least favored sectors of the population ('university extension').^[1] Although the extent to which these ideas were implemented and made real progress had varied from time to time and from country to country, many scholars have highlighted their long-lasting impact on most public universities of Latin America (Brunner, 1990; Tünnemann, 1998). According to Arocena & Sutz (2005), from these ideas emerged a quite original university, quite distant from government and industry, but close to other social sectors (trade unions, left-wing parties among others). In their view, Latin American universities had an influential role on two processes: '(i) the transition from oligarchic regimes to mass democracies;

(ii) the ideological elaboration related to the inward oriented development strategies of the imports substitution period, that started after the crisis of the 1930s' (p. 576).

By the end of the twentieth century, however, the so-called Latin American Model started to decline after so many decades of pervasive influence. Bernasconi (2007) has identified the following factors leading to its decline: (1) the expansion of enrollments and the concomitant diversification of higher education institutions; (2) the cumulative effects of its massification, which along with the external shocks inflicted by the military dictatorships in the 1970s, the economic crisis of the 1980s and the neoliberal turn in the 1990s led to the crisis of identity and legitimacy of public universities; and (3) the promotion of an international agenda in education mostly oriented to respond to the imperatives of the global knowledge economy. In terms of the first factor, in recent years, for instance, higher education systems in Latin America have grown and become much less homogeneous than they were three or four decades ago. In this regard, whereas there were 75 universities in 1950, by 1995 the number had increased tenfold. Half a century later, there are nearly 5500 universities in Latin America. Accordingly, many Latin American higher education systems made the transition from an elite access model (when enrollment is less than 15%) to a mass access model (when enrollment falls between 15 and 35%). Although the absolute number of enrollments has grown substantially, the distribution of those enrollments has been very heterogeneous in the region. Thus, one finds some mega-systems in Latin America with more than one million students (i.e. Brazil, Mexico and Argentina), while many Latin American higher education systems have less than 150,000 students (i. e. Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Dominican Republic and Uruguay) (García de Guadilla, 2003). Although when considered regionally Latin America shows a significant improvement in terms of higher education enrollments, the differences across countries suggest wide differences in terms of the democratization of access in the region (one of the CRM goals).

The rising enrollment demand and the concomitant diversification of provision have brought about new challenges to Latin American higher education systems, which need to deal with the cumulative effects of their massification (Bernasconi, 2007). Accused for their disorderly growth, low productivity, lack of accountability, dwindling quality, poor management and inefficient bureaucracies, primacy of corporatist interests, and patterns of collective government that have resulted in institutional inertia, public universities in the Southern cone have become the target of many criticisms and reform initiatives locally and externally driven. Alongside these criticisms and assuming the efficiency of the market as a superior allocative mechanism for the distribution of scarce public resources (one of neoliberalism's main claims), national governments in different parts of the region have promoted policy reforms oriented to reduce the State's participation in terms of funding, provision, and administration. In light of these initiatives, user-pays tuition fees, new providers (non-profit, and particularly, for-profit) and management technologies that include more exposure to competition, increased accountability measures and the implementation of performance goals and quality assurance mechanisms (Davies & Bansel, 2007) have become common features in many Latin American higher education systems.

Driving the rationale for change one finds not only the attempt to overcome through market-driven formulas and new organizational practices the shortcomings of a university model being considered as exhausted and anachronistic, but also the need to reformulate (or even to eliminate) its traditional compromise with social progress. As knowledge producers and disseminators, universities (not only in Latin America, but worldwide) are at the center of local and international policy reform initiatives (Carnoy, 2002). Given the strategic importance of knowledge in the global economy, universities are pressured 'to seek a closer alignment with policies supportive of economic growth and competitiveness and to do away with the dominant discourse of social transformation characteristic of the Latin American model' (Carnoy, 2002, p. 33). In line with this, Brunner (1993) has argued that policy shifts in higher education signal a new partnership between local governments and public universities according to which funding is allocated in exchange for a closer control over performance and those products that are of particular interest to the State because of their relevance for the nation's economic growth.

And while the direction of change appears to be conspicuously similar in the region, one needs to keep in mind that the actual dynamics and pace of higher education reforms differ across national systems according to their historical traditions and economic, social, political and cultural

characteristics. Following this premise, the contributors to this special issue provide an overview of the diversity and richness of some of the local and global trends and issues steering processes and change demands related to the role of higher education systems in Latin American countries. Their contributions attempt to illustrate how higher education changes are mediated and interpreted through a set of local patterns, regional discourses, and global demands. The authors concur that even when higher education transformations are impelled by globalization processes and neoliberal policy discourses which affect the expectations and notions about the role of higher education institutions and the provision of tertiary education, reform initiatives need to be made 'local'. As Jenson & Sousa Santos (2000) argue, '[in] order to diffuse efficiently, [global] processes must be made local. In each case, the general must be given specific form, specific content' (p. 21). Hence, their analyses of how higher education policies have been articulated in Latin American countries underscore the local structures and institutions, processes and practices, as well as the historical and political circumstances in which these structures and practices have emerged.

Precisely, the articles that follow describe the richness and complexity of the ways in which higher education policy has been developed, implemented and discussed in the region. For instance, in 'Macro Tendencies and Macro Tensions: Latin American higher education at the crossroads' Claudio Rama gives an overview of the main transformations and challenges affecting the higher education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean. In his article, Rama not only alludes to the national specificity of the transformations affecting Latin American higher education institutions, but he also recognizes the overall regional convergence in terms of the problems and challenges they are facing in response to global dynamics and demands. One of the macro tendencies observable in the region refers to the eradication of higher education's historic elitism, explained in part by the massification and feminization of college enrollments. Another macro tendency alludes to the process of dehomogenization triggered by the increasing institutional differentiation within the higher education sector and the flexibilization of its curricular structures. Rama also mentions the process of de-autonomization, which in his view is related to the presence of rising governmental regulations alongside the establishment of quality assessment systems and international regulations associated with the demands of a global higher education market. In line with this, he highlights the progressive denationalization of the region's higher education systems brought about by the internationalization of higher education and the creation of international accreditation mechanisms associated with the requirements of the knowledge society. Although some of these tendencies open up new possibilities, they also contribute to the emergence of political tensions and academic and institutional conflicts. Consequently, the process of transformation at the higher education level is not uniform; it supposes forward and backward movements due to the complexity of Latin American institutions and the tensions arising from any attempt seeking to change the power distribution of university actors and institutions.

In line with Rama's contribution, in 'New Demands and Policies in the Mercosur Higher Education: a comparative study on challenges, resources, and trends' Enrique Martínez Larrechea & Adriana Chiancone Castro analyze and compare trends of convergence and differentiation among higher education systems within Mercosur – a regional bloc composed of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay – as well as in Mercosur as a whole, a region which shares a common general history, but at the same time, very specific patterns. Martínez Larrechea & Chiancone Castro identify complex patterns in Mercosurian higher education systems that are similar to those observed in other higher education systems in Latin America and worldwide: massification, institutional differentiation, growth of the private sector, emergence of new providers, institutional and legal innovations as well as regional integration and internationalization. At the same time, they recognize the specificity of the Mercosurian systems, illustrated by their size, their institutional histories, their social roles and their particular academic and political contexts. Martínez Larrechea & Chiancone Castro emphasize that despite the seeming convergence among Latin American higher education systems, they differ significantly in terms of their past performances, political contexts, patterns of modernization and social significance. Furthermore, they point out that the interactive relationship between academic institutions, governments and markets varies from country to country. They conclude by arguing that through mechanisms of dialogue, follow-up, financial and technical assistance and cooperation the Mercosurian countries are developing a new shared higher education agenda. In order to consolidate these efforts, intergovernmental

coordination needs to be improved by developing more consistent accreditation systems, establishing agreements allowing student mobility, enhancing cooperation between institutions and promoting joint research.

Focusing more intensively on a particular trend, in 'Higher Education Quality Assurance Processes in Latin America: a comparative perspective', Norberto Fernández Lamarra discusses some of the scenarios and the problems emerging from the priority given in Latin American and Caribbean higher education agendas to the establishment of quality assessment and accreditation systems. Fernández Lamarra suggests that the creation of regional and national assessment and accreditation systems is being considered as a way to build mechanisms for monitoring and managing an extremely complex and heterogeneous environment that now characterizes the higher education systems in Latin American countries. He argues that the creation of these systems has stimulated the implementation of common parameters which are likely to contribute to the establishment of some sort of consistency and integration across higher education systems in the region. Nevertheless, Fernández Lamarra points out that although considerable progress has been made in several Latin American countries and in different sub-regions (i.e. Mercosur, CARICOM [Caribbean Community], and Central America) regarding quality evaluation in higher education, this still needs to be consolidated, improved and extended to the rest of the countries and regions. Recognizing that assessment is not a panacea for higher education, nor the mechanism for achieving quality in education, Fernández Lamarra considers that improving assessment and accreditation processes and the conditions for fulfilling them are relevant for the region because they promote greater transparency in a market which is strongly competitive and expanding.

Moving from assessment and accreditation issues to a problematization of the notion of flexibility, which is often advanced by higher education policy documents in terms of adaptability to the changing conditions of the global economy, in 'Thinking about Flexibility' Mario Diaz Villa emphasizes the complexity of this term and discusses its meanings and political dimensions, along with its expressions or realizations within the field of higher education. Diaz Villa indicates that the term flexibility is a relational principle whose conception is only possible in relation with the notion of boundaries. In his view, all flexible relationships presuppose a weakening of limits, demarcations and differences. By weakening those boundaries flexibility transforms the morphology of social interaction by transforming the form and content of the relationships between and within systems, organizations, individuals and groups. While breaking down the traditional demarcated and fragmented positioning of groups and individuals, flexibility opens up possibilities and opportunities for practices and socialized organizational and participative processes, and also favours the development of new ways of subjectivity, able to interact with and to understand the processes in which they are immersed. When considering flexibility in higher education, Diaz Villa argues that far from being reduced to the ability or versatility to adapt itself to the demands of a life regulated by the technological, organizational and economic contingencies of the labor market, the principle of flexibility that he is proposing implies a new way of conceptualizing and organizing academic work. This means to redefine the rigid limits within and between teaching and research and between these two practices and their social contexts. For Diaz Villa, resignifying academic work involves reconceptualizing pedagogical practice in a way that generates interdependence between the different modalities of teaching, research and social service. If used strategically, he suggests, flexibility may subvert traditional forms of organization in higher education institutions and foster new strategies and ways of interaction, learning and research between students and teachers. The article ends with a few questions one needs to remember while thinking about flexibility: in whose interest and for what purposes is flexibility being promoted? In relation to what is flexibility being considered? Why do we want to build flexible institutions of higher education?

The second set of articles in this special issue abandons the regional perspective and explores the ways in which higher education systems and institutions are being transformed in particular Latin American countries. In 'Debates and Challenges: higher education reform in Bolivia, a multicultural society', Gustavo Rodríguez Ostría describes the situation of the Bolivian higher education system in the last two decades and analyzes the nature of the debates that took place in the Constituent Assembly responsible for the draft of the new Bolivian constitution. His article shows how the neoliberal policies and discourses which dominated the Bolivian higher education agenda during the 1990s began to be confronted in 2005 after Evo Morales' ascent to government.

According to Rodríguez Ostría, Morales' administration has maintained an ambiguous position regarding public universities since, on the one hand, it has launched initiatives to strengthen public higher education, and on the other, has expressed distrust and questioned such institutions for their colonialist and monocultural character. The lack of clarity, however, has not precluded the need for a political, ideological and epistemological reorientation of public universities, along with their structural transformation. This reorientation presupposes a radical discursive shift from neoliberal-driven purposes to social inclusion of indigenous populations and their nondiscriminatory participation in the system. This reconceptualization also assumes that higher education institutions need to engage in productive processes which are inspired by models of 'education-work' characteristic of socialist educational systems. Although the change of emphasis and ideological content of the official rhetoric about higher education may open up new alternatives in this area, Rodríguez Ostría argues that Morales' government has not achieved a post-neoliberal higher education policy attuned with Bolivia's plural and multicultural reality. The *decolonization* of higher education requires more than emphasizing ethnic and cultural contradictions; it implies an intense process of dialogue and compromise between the different sectors involved in order to create a national perspective respectful of diversity. Bolivia's pending issues in higher education require less ideologically-laden rhetoric and more concrete alternatives seeking to counteract its pervasive forms of discrimination, inequality and commercialization.

The contribution by Marcelo Rabossi points to the diverse ways in which neoliberal reforms have affected higher education institutions in different institutional contexts. In 'Two Different Organizational Reactions: the university sector in Argentina and Colombia and the neoliberal proposal' Rabossi argues that the impact of neoliberal policies in Latin America is less uniform than it is often assumed. Acknowledging the historical contingency of neoliberal reforms, Rabossi's article analyzes from a comparative perspective the impact of neoliberal policies on the university sector in Argentina and Colombia during the 1990s. To assess the organizational responses to the introduction of the new managerial paradigm in Argentina and Colombia, Rabossi focuses on three dimensions: the use of performance funding to distribute resources among public universities; the introduction of tuition fees at public institutions; and the expansion of the private university sector. Rabossi concludes that the institutional response to the neoliberal-driven higher education reforms brought about different organizational reactions. For instance, the neoliberal reform in Argentina found its limitations due to cultural and political factors. In Argentina – a country with a fairly recently established private sector and a strong public higher education system ruled by a political bureaucracy – any change that could affect the distribution of power inside these institutions faced fierce resistance. This resistance ended up limiting the expansion of private higher education institutions and the privatization of public universities. On the other hand, Colombia – one of the pioneers of private higher education in the region and a country with very high enrollment rates in private higher education institutions since the 1970s – was a fertile ground for neoliberal initiatives. There is a clear and explicit interest to promote rationality in public institutions according to a model that charges tuition fees at all levels of post-secondary non-private education, alongside a private university market that plays a fundamental role in coping with a growing demand. For Rabossi, Colombia has turned what was a rigid and elitist system into a more competitive model through the introduction of market dynamics as part of a strategy for gaining competitiveness in a global higher education market. This article makes clear how social and structural differences in each country contributed to foster or hinder both the implementation of the reform and the scope of the change.

In the same vein, in 'Teletechnology and Higher Education: does the approach matter?' Rosa Nidia Buenfil discusses how specific national conditions and institutions facilitate the mediation of recommendations driven by international perspectives. In particular, her article focuses on how international and national understandings of information and communication technology (ICT) and the knowledge economy inform contemporary higher education policies. Acknowledging that national educational policies in Latin America are increasingly influenced by the recommendations of international organizations (e.g. World Bank, UNESCO, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]), Buenfil's article provides a clear example of the logics of policy transfer operating in the region. Challenging the interpretations that have tended to stress either the imposition and domination of international meanings and recommendations onto

national policies or the total indifference of national reforms vis-à-vis those international views, she contends that international policy narratives are locally appropriated and resignified. Specifically, her article deals with the ways in which higher education policy narratives on knowledge and information found in UNESCO's publications are appropriated and reconstituted in Mexico's policy documents. Buenfil argues that although there are traces of international recommendations within Mexican policies, the process of appropriation is not a mere act of translation, but rather, international policy narratives are reconstituted and informed 'by *national traditions, local particularities and some imaginaries* previously shared with international agencies'.

The focus on information and communication technologies continues, although from a different angle, in the final article by Norma Scagnoli, who in 'A Review of Online Learning and its Evolution in Latin America' discusses the scope and the implications of its use in online education programs across the region. Scagnoli indicates that the implementation of online education in different countries around the world has been closely related to their economic development. In the case of Latin America, online learning initiatives were somewhat facilitated by the rich history of its distance education programs. Scagnoli remarks that although online learning has not fully replaced the previous programs of distance education in Latin America, it has improved the supply of education and training even in those institutions which lacked distance education programs before. For instance, online education has become a predominant form of distance education at the graduate level because it provides flexible and convenient forms of communication that seemingly facilitate access to professional and postgraduate programs from leading institutions in the region, such as the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico). A less positive tendency noticeable within higher education institutions, public and private, is the increasing commercialization of distance education via online delivery as a way to boost their revenues and to reduce their administrative costs. In line with the increasing commercialization of online education opportunities, another negative trend is the high cost of online distance education programs for students from countries where higher education has been traditionally provided at low or no cost. Finally, Scagnoli offers a series of recommendations to improve the conditions of online education in the region (e.g. enhancement of the telecommunications infrastructure, funding for users' purchase of hardware and Internet access, support and training for online users and overall improvement of the quality and accreditation processes).

Taken as a whole, this compilation of articles represents a snapshot of the multifaceted scenery, changes and continuities affecting the policy and politics of higher education in Latin America. We hope that this special issue of *Policy Futures in Education* serves to illustrate not only the similarities, but also the complexities and tensions surrounding higher education reforms in the region. Policy reform initiatives in Latin America have been 'successful' in transforming tertiary institutions, but not all the time, in every country, or in every aspect intended. Many traits of the old model have survived. For instance, in spite of changes and differences, a small number of large and quite old public universities with similar histories and strong common traditions still have a hegemonic position in Latin American higher education. These universities enroll more than half of the total number of students in the region and most research and postgraduate teaching is done in those universities. Given that the evolution of most of these institutions has been strongly linked to the history of the CRM, Arocena & Sutz (2005) argue that 'it is not surprising to observe that ideas, roles and rules shaped by the Reform movement are still highly influential' (p. 580). From this it follows that for policy analyses focused on the region continuities are as important as changes. Therefore, as we set out to explore how higher education is being transformed in response to new demands and pressures, one needs to pay equal attention to the continuities in terms of academic practices, enrollment patterns and institutional missions still dominant in Latin American higher education systems.

Notes

- [1] For further information on the history and main features of the Córdoba Reform Movement, see Van Aken (1971) and Walter (1969). More recent contributions by Arocena & Sutz (2005) and Figueiredo-Cowen (2002) also provide insightful details on this movement.

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