
Traveling Policies: mobility, transformation and continuities in higher education public policy^[1]

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ABSTRACT This article presents an assessment of the impact and implications of the international mobilities operating in the national public policy environment. In fact, patterns of transformations that take place in national higher education systems are generating diverse and complex outcomes in different countries, in ways that may preclude a simple relation between international policy prescriptions and communication and policy change in higher education. In this way, the different processes that constitute globalisation within local spaces demand recognition of the importance of specificities in their constitution. In short, the starting point to understanding these processes seems to require detecting the specificity of complex dimensions in which the dynamic interaction between global and local takes place. In order to illustrate this point, the author presents the case of policy developments related to the dramatic private expansion of Paraguay's higher education sector since the 1990s.

Introduction

The transfer of policies seems to steer multiple interpretations according to the context of their application. At times, in contexts of educational and socio-economic change, policies imply the destabilisation of taken-for-granted traditional meanings that are ascribed to educational institutions (e.g. the university). In the case of Paraguay's university system, it is possible to argue, educational policies have contributed, indirectly, to the destabilisation of the meaning of university education, and to the start of a contentious and ongoing search for a redefinition of 'higher education system' by a multiplicity of actors. Policies informed by educational neoliberal narratives affecting education were borrowed and transferred in an array of complicated forms affecting the university sector. These are to a certain extent international policy narratives promoted by international organisations but rarely adopted in a straightforward manner, but instead reconstituted and informed 'by national traditions, local particularities and some imaginaries previously shared with international agencies' (Buenfil, 2009, p. 10). It is by following this line of reasoning that we can understand some of the unintended consequences that specific policy decisions have through time.

In the case of Paraguay, there have been discussions of higher education policy reform for more than ten years without any apparent resolution. Paraguay still lacks a well-defined Higher Education Act, especially with respect to private institutions. The latest debates are to a certain extent different from those in the past in the sense that they are increasingly related to the larger wave of regional accountability reforms of higher education across countries in the South American region (Argentina and Chile, among others). These debates are now occurring not simply at the national level but within a context characterised by the global circulation of policy ideas. Policy debates now seem to occur within a global context. This raises the question of the extent to which it is useful to understand policy debates about higher education within a national

space, in this case Paraguay. Indeed, I argue in what follows for a fuller consideration of the impact of the global context, and of the ways in which global-local dynamics shape developments in public policy in the national context.

In this article, I will present an assessment of the impact and implications of the international mobilities operating in the national public policy environment. In fact, patterns of transformations that take place in national higher education systems are generating diverse and complex outcomes in different countries, in ways that may preclude a simple relation between international policy prescriptions and communication and policy change in higher education. In this way, the different processes that constitute globalisation within local spaces demand recognition of the importance of specificities in their constitution. In short, the starting point to understanding these processes seems to require, as Saskia Sassen suggests, 'detecting/constructing the social thickness and specificity' (Sassen, 2000, p. 216) of the dimensions in which the dynamic interaction between global and local takes place. In order to illustrate this point, I will present the case of policy developments related to the dramatic private expansion of Paraguay's higher education sector since the 1990s.

The context of a country is usually described in relation to a bounded territory organised by the nation-state. In this sense, Paraguay is a small landlocked country in South America whose territory measures 406,752 square kilometres and has a population of 6.12 million as of 2002, with 2.6 million people living below globally defined poverty levels (Fazio, 2005, p. 7). Paraguay's economy is characterised by a large informal sector, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$14,668 billion in 2009 (IMF, 2010). In contrast to other countries in the region, a large percentage of Paraguayans still live in rural areas, where many are dedicated to subsistence agriculture. This is still a fundamentally agricultural and cattle-raising production economy (see Borda, 2007), 'with over 40 percent of the population living in rural areas' (IMF, 2009, p. 16), while most of its urban population now lives in areas that are in close proximity to the capital city of Asuncion. Paraguayan society and the country's economy have been greatly affected by process of rapid urbanisation and social change since the 1970s, leading to a dramatic quantitative expansion of its higher education system.

In recent years much has been written about the notion of policy transfer (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Evans, 2004; Ladi, 2005). This term is widely used as a means of understanding the international dimensions of national policy processes. In short, it is used in reference to globalising dynamics in policy making. According to Sklair (2007), generic globalisation in the contemporary world refers to a number of moments (forces) affecting each sector of society across nation-states. Capitalist globalisation, on the other hand, refers to dominant projects of transnational integration fostering and organising generic globalisation, as part of a capitalist global system. In this way, as Sklair (2007) points out, globalisation can be understood as 'a contested world-historical project with capitalist and other variants' (p. 94).

Furthermore, globalisation itself is now constituted through a multiplicity of flows and networks of communication facilitating different types of mobilities in ways that seem to destabilise notions of national boundaries and territorial authority in public policy (Castells, 2000, 2005; Sassen, 2003, 2007; Aneesh, 2006; Urry, 2007). If this is so, then how is policy authority at the national level shaped by global processes? It is important to remember that states' claim to public policy authority is derived in large measure from their ability to allocate values (such as resources) in order to pursue specific objectives that justify certain public expectations. But where does this authority come from, especially if authority as a type of power is exercised and not possessed? This exercise of authority is becoming increasingly complex, contested and contingent, and deeply affected by international dynamics.

For instance, as international policy arenas have become places of global production and communication of knowledge and policy advice, it has become increasingly evident that across Latin America, educational policies seem to follow global models of educational change promoted by the World Bank and other international organisations (IOs). International agents are also increasingly providing strategic structures, and helping to generate and communicate diagnostics and prescriptions about policy change at the national level. This has resulted in a certain convergence of higher education policies across countries that have widely differing cultural, economic and political traditions.

The recognition of this convergence has resulted in a rich literature (see Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Evans, 2004; Castells, 2005) using a set of ideas and concepts that suggest increasing

global mobilities or flows that included policy mobility: transfer, translation, flows, circulation, borrowing, lending and so forth. These terms are widely used to describe, and possibly also explain, different aspects of the complex system of interactions and relationships across transnational, regional, national and local spaces. They are designed to underline the contemporary dynamics of policy ideas being produced in one space but transferred in their application and utilisation to another.

For instance, the study of transfer processes in educational policy is assumed to be increasingly important because of the ways in which an emergent set of organisational patterns (a mixture of bureaucratic practices and networks) is thought to be shaping an increasingly globalised policy agenda in education. These patterns include the increasing advocacy of transnational institutions for the adoption of distinctive responses about the role of higher education by local, national and state entities. These global patterns and agendas for transformation have been described as 'traveling policy' (Ozga & Jones, 2006) or 'international models of systemic change' (Jones, 2003, p. 11).

Today, policy change in education becomes embedded in an overlapping web of policy narratives and discourses of capitalist globalisation, including those directly affecting our notions about the purposes and values of higher education. An example in the literature showing some effects of these shifts of values in Latin America is presented by Miguel de la Torre Gamboa (2004) in his work *Del humanismo a la competitividad* (From Humanism to Competitiveness). Gamboa uses a critical discourse analysis of policy documents to explore recent shifts in the understanding of values and principles affecting the practices and perspectives about higher education in Mexico. He points to ways in which ideas of change in public policies have begun to be linked to global narratives of a neoliberal project of educational change, as circulated through international organisations. He argues that a neoliberal discourse is used to inform new perspectives and beliefs on the role of the national system of education. Thus, since the 1980s, political actions and higher education institutional responses have begun to be linked to a discursive legitimating vision that renders educational purposes as subordinate assets wedged to economic ends, including the need to improve the global competitiveness of individuals and national institutions (see Torres, 2002; Maldonado-Maldonado, 2004).

All in all, the growing spread of international conventions and agreements also seems to express the emergence of a complex international institutional structure consisting of networks facilitating the flow and subsequent implementation of policy ideas among nation-states and policy actors. Now, ideologies, including those containing neoliberal ideas, and different types of educational discourses are moving across borders in an array of complicated ways.

I am using here the term 'neoliberal' in a very generic manner, as related to a set of market-driven, for-profit ideologies. Hence, I am not addressing this notion directly. Neither do I explore its specific meaning within the local case. Rather, I intend to recognise how extensive externalities, among these neoliberal ideas, have affected policy debates and shifts in higher education in Paraguay. I am interested in shifts in governance practices, together with the recognition of their international inspiration.

In the first part of this article, I will introduce the context and the many-sided ways in which a set of public policy mobilities in education operates in the Paraguayan higher education system. I seek to provide an account of some aspects of the political, social and economic dimensions, relevant to the description of Paraguay's policy environment and its system of higher education. At the same time, I provide here a partial understanding of the role that intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and local actors play in the configuration and adoption of specific global narratives about the need for policy change, and of the interactions that steered the development of a national system of higher education. This is achieved through providing an historical account that shows the crucial specificity of Paraguay's policy environment.

The National Context of Paraguayan Higher Education

In Paraguay's national context, policy transfer could be shown as a constant feature of the changing interaction between local and international dimensions in the development of Paraguay's higher education institutions. For instance, the origins of the university in Paraguay lie in various regional

transfers and local adaptations of a European organisational framework of the university, 'translated' or emulated by newly independent countries in Latin America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The collapse of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires in South America gave birth to a number of independent nation-states, including Paraguay. These states sought to build their own institutional capacities to train their national bureaucracies. Therefore, trained local bureaucrats were required for the building and running of the independent national administrative structures. Not surprisingly, Latin American nation-states borrowed heavily from various European institutional models of university organisation, interpreting the idea of the university in their own particular ways.

In the same manner, the idea of the university in Paraguay was also historically influenced by the policy transfer of the educational ideologies of successive waves of regional reforms (Rama, 2006), even if the introduction of reforms in terms of substantial changes in the higher education system has been often constrained by limits in the local and national organisational capacities, institutional resistances and particularly narrowly focused private interests.

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the phrase 'university reform' was used in Paraguay, though not in today's sense. In Latin America, the use of this expression, as Simon Schwartzman (2001) indicates, started with the Cordoba Manifest and the first wave of regionally located reforms affecting Latin American countries. The demands of students at Cordoba University in Argentina led to a wave of regional reforms, which transformed the university systems in the region by establishing 'a peculiar type of university autonomy'. Basically, the notion was that 'governments have to pay for the maintenance of the universities, but have little say on the way universities are managed' (Schwartzman, 2001, p. 11). The social imaginary of a specific type of institutional autonomy as a desirable feature of university governance still resonates in current debates about the transformation of Paraguay's higher education. In Paraguay this results in the emergence of a self-governing university system outside the control of any specific ministry or state institution. The Ministry of Education, *Ministerio de Educación y Cultura* (MEC), was until very recently primarily in charge of the primary and secondary education sector.

However, the most important element in terms of understanding the historical trajectory of Paraguay's higher education developments in the twentieth century is the prevalence of a policy environment hostile to the idea of public policy change in higher education. The political instability of the first part of the twentieth century, including a short but violent civil war, as well as the policies of dictatorial regimes, favoured an approach resistant to any substantial change in the governance structures of Paraguay's higher education institutions.

The crisis of Paraguay's liberal model of the nation-state in the 1930s and a long period of political instability presented conditions that encouraged politicisation of the only university institution in the country, the National University of Asuncion, *Univesidad Nacional de Asunción* (UNA). In the 1940s the military government acquired control of the university, and by 1954, under the Stroessner regime, the Colorado Party assumed a key role in subordinating tertiary institutions to authoritarian rule. For the next thirty-five years the possibilities of graduates securing employment in state bureaucracies became linked to an affiliation with the Colorado Party, the political arm of the regime (Serafini et al, 1989).

In the 1960s, the regime allowed a very limited and highly controlled expansion of the system, with the creation of the Catholic University of Asuncion, *Universidad Católica 'Nuestra Señora de la Asunción'* (UCA) (Law 663, September 1960). The main feature of the UCA was to mimic the institutional and academic model of the UNA (see Universidad Católica, 2000, p. 20). A radical expansion and diversification of the system was discouraged, and was only possible after the end of the dictatorial regime in 1989. The authoritarian state lacked any interest in the provision of social services at all levels, with a very low level of investment in education. It should be noted that 'the stable level of investment in education by the authoritarian regime was, for a quarter of a century, around 1% of the GDP, well below the Latin American average of investment in education' (CONEC, 2005, p. 22, my translation). This shows the lack of importance of the higher education sector as a public policy reform priority and partially explains the unfavourable conditions for introducing educational policy initiatives without international support.

It is clear that the Paraguayan state for most of the second half of the twentieth century was militarily strong but socially weak. As a result, it failed to build institutional capacities to evaluate and expand its educational system. As Nickson and Lambert (2002) contend, quoting the former

director of a European Union-funded state modernization project in Paraguay: ‘the state had been extremely weak throughout most of this period and social provision was minimal. Here there was no “over-developed state” and no “crisis of the welfare state” to contend with’ (p. 163).

After 1989, Paraguay, as a transition state, sought to expand social services and the capacities of the country, but could only do so with international assistance and expertise. This made it into a state highly dependent on international aid agencies. Thus, even after 1989, Paraguay, as a transitional society, remained extremely vulnerable to a process of coercion, voluntary coercion, or even ‘inappropriate forms of policy transfer’ (Ivanova & Evans, 2004, p. 98). Thus, it came under a tremendous amount of local and regional pressure to introduce changes in its higher education system. However, the country now experienced these pressures within a global context in which external actors, with their own agendas for transformation, provided resources, expertise and guidelines that informed policy priorities for educational reform, sometimes ignoring the local historical trajectories and traditions. For example, the pressures from financial IGOs, such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, overlooked some local demands in setting policy priorities for change in the 1990s. In the case of the development of the national higher education system, a mixture of local, regional and global pressures generated calls for unprecedented levels of expansion through autonomous and mostly for-profit-oriented institutions.

However, it is important to note that in the complex and highly politicised context of Paraguay the introduction of new laws does not necessarily imply their effective implementation. One of the most salient characteristics of Paraguay’s policymaking processes over the last 50 years is the difficulty of making any major modification to national public policies, in that ‘many areas of reform identified as crucial by key stakeholders have been stalled’ (Molinas et al, 2006, p. 41). Among others, a crucial problem persists in relation to the uneven and arbitrary allocation of financial and human resources for public reform. Local resources often are insufficient to make viable the introduction of new institutional frameworks. Past experiences of policy reform, for example, have been characterised by inefficiency, inhibiting any project of transformation of the university system.

Policy resistance by main stakeholders and lack of clarity and contradictory positions about the responsibilities of the state are part of Paraguay’s policy environment. The crucial point is that in current debates of reform the meaning of those responsibilities for higher education is the consequence of a complex and extended period of public policy interactions in education between international organisations and the Paraguayan state.

International Organisations and the Transfer of Policy

Although the notion of transfer is a perennial object of interest in the comparative policy studies literature, the concept of policy transfer itself (and related notions) have begun to appear with increasing frequency since the 1980s, often associated closely with the literature on lesson drawing. In comparative policy studies, the idea of policy transfer became associated with the increasing international movement of policy, or traveling policy, associated, in diverse and descriptive ways, with globalisation processes.

Today, prescriptive models of policy reform in higher education have striking similarities across countries. These patterns appear to suggest a form of ‘ideational convergence’ (Radaelli, 2004) of public policies, often promoted by intergovernmental organisations, such as the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Yet, according to the literature in educational policy studies, the spread of initiatives of change generates contradictory processes of creating not only actual convergence of policies and institutions towards global or regional models of transformation, but also divergent and hybridising outcomes or no specific changes at a national level.

This raises an important question: what agencies and mechanisms have led to the introduction of similar policies and the development of increasingly common structures across national systems. In other words, how has the convergence of patterns of policy development, at least at the rhetorical level, across many different countries and regions and localities emerged? In short, the way in which similar policies have become part of the educational agendas of countries

across the planet has underlined the importance of understanding how educational reform is interpreted, negotiated and takes place. For instance, Marginson and Rhoades (2002) point to the need in the literature of comparative higher education to address those global dimensions, in conjunction with an extensive exploration of the dynamics and interactions operating at a national level. Considering this issue, Stephen Ball (1998) points to the necessity of exploring this basic problem in contemporary educational policy analysis: how do international policies influence national and local educational policies?

Ball (1998) argues that contemporary global policy ideas on education have become a new belief system, an orthodoxy that links education to the concerns related to the economic wealth of nations. Thus, education now seems to have become colonised by the supposed imperatives of the global economy. This 'vision of the future' has spread globally, in diverse complex ways. The most significant among these are the activities of multilateral agencies in promoting a particular set of educational policy ideas.[2]

Ball (1998) points out, however, that these policy ideas are never translated in the same way. Nor can the resistance and negotiation to the pressures of multilateral agencies be explained in universal terms. Policy ideas, he maintains, are subject to the processes of re-contextualisation.

There are differences, divergences as well as convergences of objectives, across these organisations. On this point, I am arguing that international organisations exercise influence as organisers of global educational spaces, 'steering' different aspects of national public policies on education. They represent spaces where ideas are communicated and negotiated, but often in ways that are asymmetrical.

In this way, IGOs and international non-governmental organisations promote international policy communication of ideas through complex processes of framing, steering and re-contextualisation of policy problems and policy solutions. Their discourses, linking ideas of education to economic development, contain diverse arrays of narratives – about globalisation, the relevance of the world market economy, the knowledge economy, the crisis of education, democracy, social inclusion, among others.

Today, in developing countries in particular, national policies on education are increasingly made with the participation of IGOs at the global, regional and national level, while the global agenda of public education is articulated through these institutions. Multilateral agencies have promoted the transfer of a particular set of education policies, associated with neoliberal ideologies, that merges education within programmes of national development. However, it is often the case that policy transfer refers to the adoption of a common policy language (ideas or priorities of policy change) rather than to the development of concrete programs or models (Radaelli, 2004). This discursive convergence occurs through policy networks, bringing 'together representatives from international organisations and state agencies with politicians, the media, business groups, trade unions and sometimes grass-roots associations' (Stone, 2001, p. 14), constituted around specific parameters, knowledge resources, information, and issues.

Policy convergence, however, is not the only outcome of global policy interactions. Various modalities of transfer are also leading to a divergence in policy outcomes. For example, while there may be considerable convergence of discourses, it is also often the case that the mobility of policy ideas generates different types of adoptions and interpretations, which are very difficult to define due to the specific types of contexts and institutional frameworks.

Shifts and Continuities in Paraguayan Higher Education

In Paraguay's higher education sector, policy initiatives, narratives and research in education supported and promoted by IGOs and implemented by the state in the 1990s indirectly created and continue to influence a set of policy dynamics that at least partially explain the current policy environment for the higher education sector. As a former member of the Advisory Council for Education Reform (*Consejo Asesor de la Reforma Educativa* [CARE]) suggested, the lack of attention to higher education as public policy, especially in the university, is a result of several local factors, but it is also related to the agendas of international agencies. In a newspaper article entitled '*Quien pagara por los platos rotos?*' (Who will pay for the broken dishes?) Domingo Rivarola argued that the current state of the higher education sector in Paraguay is a direct outcome of the lack of attention

paid to it in the 1990s, when higher education was excluded from the agenda for public policy reform, largely due to external pressures. He added that the negotiations on education reform with 'international cooperation' involved a complete alignment with the policy priorities of international financial institutions (Rivarola, 2000, p. 11), which were designed to leave higher education at the mercy of private operators.

It is important to recognise, however, that the capacity of IGOs in steering policy change is limited. The transfer of policy advice and material resources is always contingent on the intentions of local policy actors, as well as on the existing, appropriate state structures that enable a relationship of receptivity concerning the international policy advice. So what was the nature of the relationship between IGOs and the Paraguayan state with respect to proposals for reform of the Paraguayan educational system at the beginning of the 1990s? It is certainly true that the Paraguayan state representatives participated fully in various world educational forums for the emerging global agenda for education reforms related to their needs and conditions. At the same time, however, Paraguay being a developing country, the financing of such reforms was always dependent on the line of credit provide by financial IGOs.

More importantly, in the 1990s, the local promoters of reform used a diverse array of global narratives to justify and generate a consensus around education reforms that they argued were essential for the modernisation and democratisation of Paraguayan society after the fall of a long dictatorial regime. In other words, they used international discourses on the purposes of education as a way to legitimise a particular set of changes that were aligned to the expectations generated around the process of political and economic transition. In this way, international discourses about Paraguay's participation in the global economy became inextricably tied to the local discourses about democratic transition.

Examples of this rhetorical interplay can still be observed in all official policy documents, including a recent policy proposal for higher education reform produced by the National Commission for the Reform of Higher Education (Comisión Nacional para la Reforma de la Educación Superior [CNRES]). For example, a document of discussion on the university reform argues:

Since the beginning of the so-called democratic transition in 1989, educational reform has been constructed as one of the more firmly shared aspirations of the Paraguayan society; this attribution was in large part the result of a very simple reflection – that only educational improvement of the population is capable of guaranteeing the future solidity of a democratic order. (CNRES, 2006, p. 19, my translation)

This local narrative is aligned to a web of interrelated discourses embraced and promoted by various international agencies, such as the agendas for educational change recommended at the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) at Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990 that eventually became transmogrified into the Millennium Goals by the United Nations. The international legitimacy that such narratives provide does not only enable local policy actors to secure lines of credit for the project of reform, it also implies the transfer of discourses and stories of educational reform linked to specific agendas for economic development.

The Jomtien declaration, as Buchert (1995), Reimers (1995) and others have pointed out, contains a number of recommendations that have informed key changes in the policy priorities in Latin America. As Reimers notes, the Jomtien declaration involved a general consensus among the major IGOs involved in the education sector to increase international support for basic education, with the goal of entitling every child in the world to receive primary education by 2015. Reimers quotes a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) executive director, who maintained the following:

UNICEF, the World Bank, UNESCO, and the UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] are in agreement that a special effort should be made to ensure that by the year 2000 virtually all children are achieving a common early level of achievement, in literacy, numeracy and basic life skills. (Reimers, 1995, p. 36)

Basically, this opened up the possibility for international support for major reforms in basic education systems throughout the region. As Lene Buchert (1995) notes, after Jomtien:

many national and multinational donor organizations have showed renewed concern for the Basic Education level. This is expressed in the focus on Basic Education in numerous policy documents, whether they are individual subsector documents, part of education sector documents, or integrated in[to] broader development strategy documents. (Buchert, 1995, p. 546)

International conferences around this agenda played a crucial role in the process of transfer of ideas about educational change. Narratives presented at these conferences were later used by local policy players to convey a specific rhetoric, even a sense of urgency for action. In this sense, the stories framed a particular logic to justify local priorities, in the name of international cooperation.

However, the role that these international stories of reform play in the implementation of policy actions is more complex. On the one hand, they serve to justify the international support for policy initiatives put forward by national actors, and on the other, they become a legitimising factor in creating local consensus that justifies the need for 'change'. However, this does not imply that individual countries follow a homogeneous or predictable pattern of international reform. Even as all countries and institutions appear to use a pool of international stories and common rhetoric to justify the need for change, they do so in ways that differ according to different national context and policies. For instance, this can be observed when one reads different country reports addressing the notion of quality that have been written during the current regional wave of initiatives to ensure quality assurance mechanisms in higher education (Lamarra, 2009).

Stories, as opposed to official discourses, are more important in articulating a particular logic about the 'social purposes' of transformation and their possible consequences. It is in these stories that education became central to economic policies implemented in developing countries in the 1990s. At the same time, these policies were aligned to a body of research that sustained a pervasive logic about the nature of human beings as subordinated to a global pattern of economic development. More importantly, policy priorities have become aligned with particular assumptions about development, education and the role of the state in a global context. These assumptions were further supported by the research produced by international organisations, which often articulated a general set of priorities for educational change, and paid little attention to the specificities of the local context in developing countries.

These generalised principles, as I have already argued, largely ignored the tertiary sector, creating conditions that led to the private unregulated expansion of Paraguay's higher education system. It is in the context of a policy vacuum that the state in a sense allowed the expansion of private initiatives. Therefore, a symbolic policy promoted by IGOs towards the privatisation and deregulation of higher education became effectively translated in Paraguay into an ad hoc expansion of the tertiary system, albeit in ways in which quality and the public good were largely sacrificed. This analysis suggests that recent changes in higher education in Paraguay are in effect the hybrid outcome of the continuation of past policy trajectories and ideas and newer policy suggestions emanating from IGOs.

Policy Challenges

A direct translation of the term 'challenge' in the Spanish language is *desafío*. An understanding of the term can itself convey the idea of a number of pressures and dilemmas confronting policy-makers. In the case of educational policy this has connotations of both risks and opportunities. With an awareness of this connotation, the word *desafío* was inserted into the title of an important policy report during the initial planning period of the Paraguayan educational reform of the 1990s: *El Desafío Educativo*.

The document was written with the advice and support of the Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID) in 1995, and is important for an understanding of the way in which challenges and educational opportunities were initially framed by local policy actors, following the profound transformations that affected Paraguay society after 1989. The proposals in this document were not merely linked to the theme of reform in the basic and secondary sectors, such reform was viewed as part of the political process of democratic transition. The document also mentioned suggestions for changes to the higher education system. These suggestions responded to a set of external demands associated with an accelerated process of transformation of

Paraguayan society, which include the desire, among a group of policy actors, for a planned integration of Paraguayan higher education into the work the state needed to do in strategic planning for the future. It is important to point out that HIID's vision for education, as presented in *El Desafío Educativo*, and later in a planning document, shares a set of assumptions about the challenges confronted by Paraguay's educational system that are similar to those presented in a diagnostic document of the Paraguayan educational system [3] elaborated by HIID and a local non-governmental organisation, the Paraguayan Center of Sociological Studies (*Centro Paraguayo de Estudios Sociológicos* [CPES]).

This study was made with members linked to CARE, and was financed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as part of the Advancing Basic Education and Literacy (ABEL) project (HIID & CPES, 1993, p. 10). It was published in 1993 with the title *Análisis del Sistema Educativo en el Paraguay. Sugerencias de Políticas y Estrategia para su Reforma* (Analysis of the Educational System in Paraguay. Suggestions of Policy and Strategy for Its Reform).

Each of these documents contains a combination of descriptions of Paraguayan education and a set of prescriptions that are driven by an implicit international ideology of education that I will outline later in this section. The first pages of the document on strategic planning, for example, state that the key challenges in Paraguay were to consolidate its democracy, increase productivity and reduce poverty, while preserving a sense of national identity within the framework of the process of regional and global integration, in order to steer a path towards sustainable development (MEC et al, 1996a, b).

Yet, in reading policy documents produced by HIID relating to the diagnosis and planning of the educational reform in Paraguay, it is hard to see how the recommended objectives of education and its strategies of reform were not in fact more suited to the introduction of changes at the level of higher education.[4]

The report, *El Desafío Educativo*, emphasises the articulation of a broad vision of policy change that can easily be shared by an important segment of key stakeholders in the educational system who recognise readily that the legacy of the dictatorial regime needs transformation, a legacy that left the education system unable to address the social and international challenges confronting the country.

To express the challenges in international terms implies that the role of local stakeholders, who were in fact a part of the dictatorial system, has not been revisited. The language of international challenges was also considered appropriate in relation to the entrance of Paraguay into the Common Market of the South, *Mercado Común del Sur* (MERCOSUR), which defined a new reality for the nation, without revisiting its past. In Paraguay, the project of regional integration has had profound, though indirect, implications for policy planning in education by creating a forum of regional cooperation that has proposed the harmonisation of the educational systems among its members. The protocols and agreements signed at MERCOSUR have thus become an important element of educational planning in Paraguay.

MERCOSUR's proposals for change have been defined in terms of global economic competition. As such, one has to compare Paraguay with other countries in the region. *El Desafío Educativo* has indicated, for example, that the Paraguayan higher education system is weak in comparison with other systems in the region, and this has major implications for its economic competitiveness. Essentially, the document suggests three basic problems: (a) low quality; (b) low relevance of programmes; and, (c) low number of graduates needed to meet the labour demands of the country. This report provides data showing low coverage by the system, a low percentage of high school graduates seeking access to higher education, and low levels of university retention. Against such a bleak description, ironically, most of the educational reforms proposed in the report relate to the basic and secondary levels of education, with only a minor attention paid to the higher education sector.

This is in part explained by the leading role of the Ministry of Education in this process of education reform. A characteristic of the Paraguayan educational system is its dual nature. In short, as a dual system, educational policies in Paraguay are formulated by two distinct bodies: the Ministry of Education and the universities. There is very little in the way of policy coordination across these two sectors. In its policy documents the CNRES describes this system arrangement as fragmented. It has stated the following:

A characteristic of the educational system is its segmentation into two sectors which are functionally disconnected. On one hand, university education is constitutionally autonomous [from state control] and self-governed. On the other hand, secondary education is organized under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Both sectors lack institutional mechanisms to ensure a functional articulation between them. In these circumstances, there is no unity of purpose between those two levels, such as that their respective policies might operate in an integrated manner to define, at least in theory, a national education system. (CNRES, 2006, p. 33, my translation)

Thus, in the introduction of educational reforms in Paraguay, universities were excluded from the process of reorganisation of Paraguayan education as a whole. Exempted from this exclusion were the teacher education institutes. Those institutes were in charge of the professional formation of teachers, and operate under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. As a result, university institutions became isolated from the reform process (as if no connection existed between secondary and tertiary education).

Thus, the terms of educational challenges facing Paraguay became framed by the need to prioritise basic education, consistent with a global vision of educational reform articulated by major IGOs. So, even as the document *Paraguay 20/20 enfrentemos juntos el desafío educativo: Plan Estratégico de la Reforma Educativa* (Paraguay 2020: strategic plan for education reform) (MEC et al, 1996b) stated that programmes of reform needed to take place at the four levels of human resource formation - secondary education, technical education, professional formation and higher education - little was said about how these levels worked with each other, or how the proposals for reform could constitute an 'articulated' national system. The strategies elaborated in the report suggested that 'the global program of reform for the four systems of human resource formation of Paraguay were to advance gradually and by stages' (MEC et al, 1996b, p. 13, my translation). In this sense, basic education was to take precedence over other educational sectors.

Similarly, the HIID technical advisors had argued, even before the arrival of the mission, that 'while the idea of a reform seemed to receive much lip service by internal and external stakeholders, few, including members of the advisory reform commission and the senior managers for the ministry, could formulate a vision of the reform' (Reimers & McGinn, 1997, p. 168). For them, the objective of the mission was 'to help to create a common language and a shared vision of the education system about the goals of reform, and about specific projects which could be implemented to support it' (p. 168). Yet this language was largely a borrowed global language that focused on basic education at the expense of other sectors of education.

It is important to understand that educational challenges are defined in the documents of educational reform in terms of serious deficiencies in human resource formation in Paraguay. Basically, the descriptions provided by the HIID and MEC stressed that the national education system was unable to offer adequately skilled workers for initiating a process of industrial development and economic transformation. This severe structural problem was further accentuated by the prevailing context in which rapid changes in the global economy were affecting Paraguay's own relationships with the region and the world. As mentioned previously, after 1989, Paraguay became part of the Common Market of the South, thereby participating in a regional process of economic integration that generated a series of external pressures for transforming the educational system.

This presented a number of challenges for the country, but also provided opportunities in the sense of the emergence of a policy environment favourable to the introduction of educational reforms in the country. Thus, these developments not only augured well for the emerging democratic transition, they also held out, as well, the promise of Paraguay's entry into a new era of economic modernisation. All this, however, has to be set against a troubling reality: the low level of public investment according to international parameters and the absence of available international financing for expanding the public system leave few options apart from private expansion.

According to critics such as Melquíades Alonso, the process of elaboration of the planning and implementation of reforms was strongly dependent on the framework established by international organisations such as the World Bank. In his article 'La propuesta educativa del Banco Mundial' [The educational proposal of the World Bank], Alonso (2000) points out that the priority given by

the reform in the 1990s to basic and general basic education leaves the rest of the sectors of the system without any operative changes. In these terms:

secondary education, technical education, university education, and even adult education are absent from the project of reform and are operating in the same manner established by the educational innovations elaborated in the 1970s, or through initiatives organized by business sectors ['sectores empresariales']. (Alonso, 2000, p. 2, my translation)

Basically, educational policies elaborated in the 1970s were sustained with little modification in the 1990s due to the absence of policy innovations. According to Alonso, the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank (IADB) proposals were highly influential during the initial period of planning and subsequent implementation of the educational reform. The project of reform that the World Bank supported for implementation in the country was basically, according to Alonso, one of:

increased coverage of the basic education until the 9th grade, improvements on the efficiency of the system in terms of cost-benefits, and the privatization of university and secondary education. (Alonso, 2000, p. 6, my translation)

In other words, this was a proposal of educational reform that saw as the priority the formation of human capital, with the main criteria being cost-benefits analysis and economic projects of development. This implied, in practical terms, that the loans available for reforms in the 1990s in Paraguay mainly prioritised basic education.

The subsequent massification of the university system and the effects of the educational reform favoured the emergence of a complex and very diverse system of higher education in which the boundaries of the university system and higher education in general became less clear than in the past. This is observed in the ambiguity of the position and precise place that teacher preparation now has. According to the general law of education, teacher training centres are situated within the higher education system, but it seems that institutes of teacher preparation, though at the tertiary level of education, are still closely associated with the idea of secondary education rather than university education.

According to Crista Weise (2007), the key elements common to the regional agendas of transformation of higher education supported by IGOs (World Bank, IADB, UNESCO, etc) in the 1990s were:

(a) reduction of state financial investment in higher education or diversification of sources of financing; (b) linking of universities to the market and the productive system; (c) selectivity in access; (d) control, regulation and evaluation by state, transparency (accountability by universities), and (e) institutional reform linked to standards of productivity, efficiency and efficacy as elements of institutional quality. (Weise, 2007, p. 122, my translation)

Paraguay seems to have adopted most of the elements of this regional agenda. However, this has been done within a policy environment characterised by a weak state without the capacities or institutions to organise or monitor the university system as a whole. This has meant rapid expansion, but also diversification and stratification of Paraguay's university system around autonomous commercially oriented institutions. In other words, the system has become self-regulated, but lacks any coherent national purpose, or any significant measure of coordination.

Therefore, in the 1990s, innovations introduced to expand the university system responded to the increasing local demand for tertiary education, as well as to regional pressures generated in the form of an agenda of regional integration expressed through the idea of a Common Market of the South. A year after the promulgation of the new national constitution (1992), in line with this regional agenda, Paraguay introduced a law for universities (law 136/93) which formalised a minimalist role for the state in the governance of its National University, the 'flagship' institution of the system. But the 1992 legislation did not seek to introduce substantial positive changes; instead, it removed any past restrictions for the creation of new university (private) institutions. The state effectively withdrew initiatives to govern the national system of higher education. The only regulatory measure left was the creation of a Council of Universities (*Consejo de Universidades* [CU]), whose members, as it turned out, were the rectors (and often the owners) of the new universities themselves. Among its functions were the coordination and formulation of a national university

policy, and the evaluation of university institutions. More important is the fact that the CU was established with scarce technical and financial resources to operate effectively.

Between 1989 and 1999, 17 new institutions were recognised as universities, 14 of them private (Rivarola, 2004, p. 47). In 1998, the New General Law of Education created the National Council of Education and Culture (*Consejo Nacional de Educación y Cultura* [CONEC]). This became the main public advisory body in charge of all reform efforts at all levels of education policy. Universities now became nominally integrated into an education system, over which CONEC was given oversight. Yet, this legal reform only tangentially addressed some of the more pressing issues facing higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the creation of CONEC did indicate a shift in policy that suggested the need for increased attention to higher education reform.

This attention, however, cannot merely be explained by endogenous factors; a number of externalities affecting Paraguay's policy development must also be considered, including increased pressure for the harmonisation of Paraguay higher education, with a set of minimal requirements on educational quality and student mobility agreed at MERCOSUR forums, as well as the implicit adoption of a regional discourse on the need for higher education reform around those issues. Moreover, international agendas of change are not static, but rather refer to extended periods of time. In the second half of the 1990s, there was a policy shift in the international agenda of education reform in relation to the higher education sector. For instance, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the World Bank and UNESCO were establishing a new common regional agenda for higher education. Rodríguez-Gómez and Alcántara (2001) describe this agenda as follows:

an attitude more favorable to the strengthening of the higher education, science and technology systems of developing countries would be expected providing projects are congruent with the 'hard' lines of the proposal: pragmatism, reinforcement of private participation, insistence on quality and efficacy, formulas of social compensation, use of distance education options, lifelong education approach, among the principal aspects. (p. 519)

Hence, the World Bank and other financial IGOs shift priorities and recommendations about higher education and knowledge production investment in terms of national innovation initiatives in science and technology.

It is important to understand that in the case of Paraguay the regulation of 'market' institutions is now perhaps one of the most urgent issues in public debates. In 2004, the National Congress introduced Law 2529/04. This legislation diluted the minimum requirement demanded by the Law of Universities, consisting in the approval of the Council of Universities. In this way, even the limited criteria for the authorisation of new universities that existed before disappear. Pedro Gerardo González, the Rector of the National University, has observed that the National Congress can approve the opening of new institutions without the input of the Council of Universities, while universities are free to open faculties, campuses, and new professional schools without any constraints (Caballero, 2007). In this context, the expansion of the system has been acquiring a dramatic character in recent years (Table I).

Type of institution	Private	Public	Number of Institutions
Universities	46	8	54
Institutes of Higher Education	23	7	30
Teacher Training Colleges/Institutes of Professional Teacher Formation	59	41	100
Institutes of Technical Education	228	20	248

Table I. Number of higher education institutions in Paraguay by institutional type and sector (2011). Adapted from DGES (2010, 2011).

As observed, in Paraguay the state usually meets political demands about the university system through legislative reforms. However, attempts to create a regulatory framework for university education have been paralyzed due to the lack of consensus on several points. Among these is the disagreement over issues of autonomy and the demands of accountability. This is of course a

crucial point of contention for many owners, of newly created private universities in particular, who fear their profit margins evaporating.

Moreover, as mentioned before, as an effect of its recent dictatorial past, Paraguay, as a transition state, has experienced recurrent cycles of political instability, generating a sense of extreme uncertainty among policy makers – and thus a reluctance to act decisively and impartially. The implementation of the regional agenda of educational development in Latin America in the 1990s, for example, created problems for Paraguayan policy makers in having to juggle local and regional demands. In the current context, new global and regional discourses of reform are thus useful to Paraguay's policy makers. To solve a local problem, they can always point to the need to borrow IGOs' ideas and pursue regional agreements in relation to priorities for reforming the educational system. However, the conundrums confronting the higher education sector are not simple questions or problems awaiting solutions. They require a more complex treatment of issues than is provided by IGOs, and that cannot be expressed in legislative responses to local pressures or merely as global challenges.

At this point, what Jürgen Habermas calls 'knowledge constitutive interests' (Habermas, 2005, p. 318) and what Michel Foucault calls 'power-knowledge' (Foucault, 1980) constantly operate at different stages of the process of production and negotiation of policy movements and their adoption in international and local spaces. But influence itself is not necessarily exclusively a function of exogenous factors.

As Riart (2006, pp. 17-18) points out, there are six basic overlapping local perspectives or narratives used in the current discussion and proposals of university reform (and I will add to this higher education reform in general) in Paraguay:

- (a) analysis based on the study of possible changes in the legal framework. The underlying idea of the advocates defending this approach is that changes in the current laws will produce a transformation of the system;
- (b) analysis and proposal based on the idea of a more assertive and direct role of the state and the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) in the regulation of the university system, aligned with the narrative of regional higher education reform;
- (c) perspectives working with ideal 'models' of university, basically criticising or asserting proposals using the three classic ideal models of university (French, German and Anglo/American) as parameters of discussion;
- (d) perspectives that discuss ideas of reform of higher education institutions as commercial enterprises. Basically, in this perspective universities are mainly businesses providing services;
- (e) perspectives proposing a radical institutional change; and finally,
- (f) perspectives that mock the intentions of any proposal of change.

These reform system perspectives indicate contradictory positions and interests in reference to the type of changes to be introduced.[5]

What is clear, then, is that international and local networks have affected various discourses of higher education in Paraguay around such issues as private expansion, poor quality and, most crucially, privatisation. These discourses have expressed a range of opportunities and expectations of education within the broader narrative of globalisation. Basically, education is seen as an important ingredient in national economic development within a competitive global economy. These economic perceptions have generated demands for the transformation of higher education in Paraguay. These demands for change have been characterised both as a challenge and as an opportunity.

However, all this is not entirely 'new'; such challenges have always existed for higher education. Since education institutions in Paraguay have historically been dependent on international cooperation, they have had to take external pressures into account. What is 'new' now is the systematic way in which global and regional influences are articulated in an attempt to shape the vision of the changes to follow. The systematicity of the processes of communication and promotion of those general narratives points to universalizing visions of change. At the same time, local state characteristics and policy environments mediate the borrowing and implementation of agendas of change. In Paraguay, the lack of substantial changes in higher education during the long dictatorial regime (1954-1989) resulted, for the most part, in the absence of policy change and the exclusion of Paraguay from regional reforms in higher education. However, since the 1990s,

Paraguay's higher education system, seemingly ready for change, has followed a common regional and global pattern of change characterised by rapid massification, institutional differentiation, growth of the private sector, emergence of new providers, institutional and legal innovations, as well as regional integration and internationalisation (Larrechea & Chiancone Castro, 2009).

Yet, change so far has been largely cosmetic, trapped within the historical patterns of inertia and resistance by elite interests to a well-structured and coordinated system of higher education. Changes are occurring, but with a virtual absence of an articulate and coherent set of policy initiatives by state institutions, an absence of reforms to the institutional model of the university, and slow development of state capacities for the coordination of the system.

Conclusion

There are several reasons for international borrowing, mimicking, emulation, etc., of a policy solution or priorities of changes. The causes of the development of a specific policy export, or recommendation of policy change, are usually linked to a vision of change. However, centres of reception for these policy recommendations, or ideas, are confronted with external and internal constraints to change, often in different ways according to the content of the policy and the objective of the policy export.

To begin with, I suggest that policy transfer as practised within the system of states is always contingent upon local realities. The international priorities for policy change are transformed through time, and the ongoing processes of transfer constantly modify the conditions in which changes in the narratives and priorities of public policy are discussed by local actors. Charles Tilly (2004) has argued that the global flows of ideas and forms of organisation, knowledge and methodologies in education, as in other fields of practice, are thus linked to the complexity of both discursive and material transformations taking place in contemporary societies. Indeed, these flows contribute to the construction of contemporary education systems, while influencing the manner in which planning and policy development on education takes place.

In the Paraguayan case, the recommendation for shifting public investment away from universities, and the subsequent privatisation that occurred, were implemented in ways that follow a similar pattern of responses by the state. This is equally related to the historical and institutional context in which proposals for reform are debated and implemented. As Brunner (2009) points out, albeit in relation to different institutional patterns, the historical trajectory of common responses applied by Latin American governments towards higher education has been increasingly one of limiting interventions 'to financing their systems while they leave coordination to the free play of institutional and corporate interests, the forces of supply and demand, and the negotiation of bureaucratic rules between universities and public authorities' (p. 2). In other words, according to Brunner, Latin American governments for the most part have been unable to exercise control over their higher education systems.

This historical trajectory is common to systems that organically share the common characteristic of reliance on Western European institutional imports, in the form of symbolic borrowing of frameworks of institutional organisations (Brunner, 2009). To external observers, this may lead to a set of confusions and misunderstandings in relation to the different types of institutions, which, despite sharing the same denomination, were constituted in Latin American countries. In other words, 'the profound social and cultural differences could not but lead to serious misunderstandings and problems of both transfer and translation' (Brunner, 2009, p. 3). Paraguay's higher education system and institutions are not an isolated phenomenon, but the result of long processes of policy borrowing and lending.

In this sense, the outcomes of internationally inspired educational policies and ideologies during the education reforms of the 1990s, and their subsequent strategic planning and implementation in Paraguay, have had a number of unintended consequences for the development of the Paraguayan higher education system in relation to the way in which local actors and state structures were prepared to manage those transformations.

At first glance, the activity of international organisations concerned with public policy in higher education continues to be weak or marginal. Attempts to provide technical assistance, forums of discussion, or financial support are still limited at the local level while debates occur

within communities of discussion in informal and diverse groups. They use many of the same references and are constituted by a reduced number of the same policy actors and local referents, but often they do not communicate between and among each other very well. Processes of policy circulation and their uptake by states are always contingent upon local realities.

The international priorities of policy change are transformed through time, but the outcome of ongoing processes of transfer constantly modifies the conditions in which changes in narratives and priorities of public policy are discussed by local actors. In these situations, it is more methodologically useful to read transfer as an assemblage of ideological strategies, instead of as rational processes of policy-making. Therefore, the intensity of interactions between local and global policy actors on a specific policy issue (e.g. public policies related to higher education) can also be read in terms of the type of power strategies implemented at different stages of transfer, and in terms of the interaction between the specific institutional settings that lead to the resulting transformations.

Proposals for reform do not necessarily imply change. At the same time, changes can sometimes occur even in the absence of specific reforms. Changes, in terms of the growth and diversification of a system of higher education institutions, do not necessarily imply substantial transformation in the ways in which institutions in a national system operate. In the same way, transfer and the implementation of specific modifications in public policy may represent only a symbolic adoption, resulting from policy inertia or political resistance to innovation in public policy, as observed in the case of Paraguay.

As shown through descriptions of the context, contingency is relevant to any modification in a system. The initial introduction of policy innovations, the promulgation of new legislation, and the effective constitution of new institutions are all contingent on local policy environments. This analysis points to the importance of historical approaches to the study of policy mobility in creating conditions for the development of educational systems in each country. This development of policy is often related to common patterns of historically constituted public policy response, where approaches of university institutions – both new and old – to reform initiatives are based, for example, on long-held beliefs about university autonomy. However, as this article indicates, global or regional patterns are not irrelevant, but are contingently applied.

Similarly, the significance attached to the activities of IGOs in public policy seems contingent on particular economic and political interests, local policy trajectories, and past processes of international transfer. This is the Paraguayan case.

Notes

- [1] A shorter version of this article was published in Britez, 2011.
- [2] A basic weakness in Ball's argument, however, seems to be his silence over the possibility that multilateral agencies are becoming not merely instruments of institutional diffusion of educational policy ideas but also places where competing re-contextualisation of these ideas take place.
- [3] A basic difference between recommendations in the first document and those presented in the strategic reform document is that the former directly recommends an increase in public funding for higher education, while the latter suggests the need for discussing the reduction of public investment to the sector.
- [4] In their book *Informed Dialogue: using research to shape education policy around the world*, Fernando Reimers and Noel McGinn (1997), the main Harvard advisers in charge of the technical mission to Paraguay, begin by providing a description of their mission and the ways in which international experts helped to develop the general vision of education reform in Paraguay. They maintain that during the mission:

Harvard advisors resisted the demands of the ministry to produce a strategic plan and a series of studies. Instead they focused on developing institutional capacity to produce that plan and to generate research-based knowledge. They proposed four key units for Paraguay's Ministry of Education: a strategic dialogue group, a policy analysis unit, a planning unit, and a research unit. (Reimers & McGinn, 1997, p. 168)

It is important to note that the group, headed by the Harvard experts, was composed of twenty

policy actors, including Paraguay's Minister of Education, some senior members of the ministry, and members of the Advisory Council for Education Reform. In other words, the process of review was captured and managed largely by the Ministry of Education itself.

[5] I tend to agree with Riart's assertion (2006, pp. 17-18) that local perspectives of university reform are often based on very simplistic propositions of change referring to a very complex problem. Each perspective uses, to a certain degree, elements of international narratives, or rhetoric, to justify the need for change, rather than as a base for analysis.

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