

The state and higher education in Colombia

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Abstract. The development of higher education in Colombia is discussed in terms of its recent quantitative expansion and the accompanying qualitative differentiation. Beginning in 1980 with the University Reform of that year, the state sought to give shape to the system by policies intended (i) to improve its organization (ii) to expand it on more democratic lines and (iii) to improve its quality. The authors discuss the developments which marked attempts to implement these aims. Two critical policy areas emerged — the funding of the system and the administration of the public sector part of it. Current debates are analysed and the authors provide pointers to possible future developments including the development of a highly stratified system with little interaction between the top and the bottom.

Development of Colombia's university sector in this century has been characterized by both quantitative expansion (in the number of students, teachers and institutions) and qualitative differentiation (in the types of courses, programs and institutions). This evolution has gone hand in hand with modernization of the economy and urban concentration and is similar to what has occurred in virtually every higher education system in the world. Thus, alongside the more traditional university studies (law, medicine and philosophy), there first emerged a number of more modern programs of study (introducing and diversifying engineering and economic sciences, in particular) and subsequently mass-consumption degree courses (long or short professionalizing often evening courses of mediocre quality, having little research content). These three modes did not develop in successive historical stages, rather they have overlapped one upon the other and now coexist not only within the same system but often also within one and the same institution.

The eighties — three types of state policies

Colombia entered the eighties with what was not so much a system of higher education as a heterogeneous and scattered conglomeration of more than a hundred medium to small institutions providing a setting for interplay by a very wide variety of actors: public authorities at the national, regional and municipal levels, and private entities governed by religious orders, private foundations, or political or economic groups. While the interests of the 'universities' were represented by ASCUN (Asociación Colombiana de Universidades), a new association — ACIET (Asociación Colombiana de Instituciones de Educación Tecnológica) — appeared on the scene to represent those of a growing number of non-university institutions, many of which still lacked official authorization to operate as centers of higher education.

From 1980 on the state sought to regain the initiative it had lost in the previous decades in the matter of higher education. We shall analyze its actions, and for the sake of simplicity shall initially distinguish three types of explicit policy measures: those designed 1) to structure and organize the system; 2) to expand it and make it more democratic; and 3) to improve its quality. Formulation and implementation of policies in each of these three groups reached a height in the early, middle and late eighties respectively.

By 'policy measures' we mean essentially such concrete (legal, financial or development) action by the state as was intended in some way to effectively redirect or orient the impetus given to the system by expansion and diversification processes, and not simply policy rhetoric and debate that produced no concrete measures.

Organizational and structural policies

After unsuccessful attempts in the early seventies to restructure the university sector, a political agreement was eventually reached between the executive and legislative branches on the need to reform the country's higher education system. This agreement was embodied in the University Reform of 1980.

The reform aimed to organize higher education by first defining its components and then arranging them within a structured system. Four possible modes of higher education were established as the basic components, two below university level and two in the university sector: 1) Intermediate Vocational (later changed to Technical) Training, 2) Technological Training, 3) University Training (as commonly understood to include both education in a scientific discipline and training for a profession), and 4) Advanced Training (post-graduate specialization at the level of master's and doctor's degrees).

This structure was intended, first, to allow upward flow between the modes; and second to establish a hierarchy among institutions according to the type of higher education they are authorized to provide, by classifying them as vocational training institutes, technological institutes, or university institutions. To qualify as true universities, institutions must offer degree courses in at least three different disciplines and/or professions and must show that they have a solid infrastructure for research work, to be combined with teaching. Only authorized universities may establish programs of advanced academic training (master's degrees and doctorates).

In the third place the system, as shaped by the reform, is governed by two sets of unified legal provisions, one for the state sector and the other for the private sector. The state is responsible for the funding, control and management of public institutions (their rectors are appointed by the executive). But with respect to private universities the state's role is limited to exercising supervision and control in academic and economic matters and at time providing orientation.

Early criticism of the reform varied in focus depending on the actors involved. Thus the association of state teachers resented their change of status to 'public

employees', which meant that they would have no right to engage in collective bargaining with the state as employer. Private universities, for their part, regarded the reform decrees as providing for excessive intervention by the state in their financial and administrative affairs, and thereby violating their freedom of teaching.

In the medium term the university reform proved highly instrumental in recovering state initiative — lost for twenty years — in expanding and organizing the country's system of higher education. A set of ground rules was established, the components of the system were defined, and legal status was given to a number of technological training institutes that had long been operating on a nebulous border between secondary and further education.

But proliferation of low-quality institutions could not be checked. And in fact, as we shall see below, with the official entry of numerous small poor-quality institutions into the system of higher education, the standard of the system as a whole tended to drop. Nor were the 'new' components defined with any precision, as recent studies show that the labor market makes no clear distinctions between graduates of the intermediate vocational mode and those of the technological mode (Gómez 1989). The expected flow between the different modes was practically nil, for few universities set up two cycles of university training, and the prestigious ones often did not admit technological training graduates to their degree courses.

During the rest of the eighties no further major policy measures were taken for structuring and organizing the higher-education system. Certain analysts did however insist on the need for grouping and regionalizing at least the state universities so as to reduce their extremely high degree of fractionalism, but this did not become a priority issue.¹

At the end of the decade, in the course of a major debate about the quality of higher education, the director of ICFES put forward fresh proposals regarding organization of the system. But these proposals failed to make it through the debating stage to be translated into concrete policies, though they did have the merit of making a social issue again of the need of reorganizing the country's entire higher-education system.

Policies to promote expansion of the system

In a system in which the private sector has been growing faster than the public sphere, the part played by the state in the process of expansion has been rather a passive one. It has consisted mainly of action to legitimize private initiative and has been marked by a certain permissiveness toward proliferation of poor-quality institutions.

The most clearly defined state policy designed to stimulate expansion of the system was the measure adopted in the mid-eighties to promote long-distance higher education. Action undertaken in connection with this project included making clear policy statements about it in governmental discourse, establishing legal instruments for it (legislative enactments and executive decrees), and providing concrete financial and technical support (from international sources) to

further its implementation. The project was one of a series of populist-tinged measures (on peace, housing, education in general) that characterized the government of Belisario Betancur (1982–1986).

The actors involved in this policy were therefore the state, acting in a promoting and funding capacity not only through ICFES (Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior, the state agency for development of higher education), but directly from the President's Office; international funding agencies, and a host of experts and consultants engaged through agreements with such agencies; and lastly such public or private universities as were interested in participating, either to strengthen long-established programs of their own design, or to set up new programs fast, so as to become eligible for receiving funds administered by the state.

Although the policy was very explicitly defined and was provided with the necessary instruments, it proved far less effective in expanding the system than was originally expected. Nor did it succeed in diversifying the source of demand for education, for 60 per cent of the new places offered under the project were taken up by schoolteachers looking for a quick cheap way of obtaining an academic degree to get promotion. With the change of government in 1986 the project was brought under appraisal and began to receive fewer and fewer incentives. The policy of legitimizing low-quality, easily accessible, mass university training gradually came into conflict with others designed to improve quality and check the expansion of third-class higher education.

Yet, although the state has not played a very significant part in expanding the system quantitatively, the presence of state institutions in the system has in fact helped to direct its expansion toward socially more relevant and equitable modes. Thus in the state subsector, consisting of fewer but on the average larger institutions with on the whole better qualified and more stable teaching staffs, programs of study in the more costly areas (medicine and dentistry) and more strategic ones (agricultural sciences, mathematics and natural sciences) carry greater weight. Moreover, public institutions are more evenly distributed across the land.

In contrast, in the private sector institutions are smaller but more numerous, with less stable and not so highly qualified teaching staffs; expansion has been substantially due to lower-standard evening programs; degree courses in the social and economic sciences predominate; and two thirds of the institutions are concentrated in the country's three largest cities.

Policies to improve the quality of the system

Uncontrolled expansion, and a differentiation arising not so much from intrinsic maturing of the different fields of knowledge as in response to market demand, are the reasons why the university model implanted in Colombia has not in practice included the research function. As a result, the professionalizing function per se has been repetitive, mechanical and credit-tuned.

Efforts by the state to improve the quality of the system have been rather contradictory, because of the difficulty of reconciling the actors' not always compatible interests. Thus measures intended to increase mass university education or to reduce public spending are liable at any time to prove detrimental to quality. Yet one can discern in the eighties a number of policies that were meant to favor enhancement of the standard of higher education. Adopted at different times over the decade, they became the object of greater emphasis toward the end of it.

In the first place action was taken for progressive consolidation of a national plan for science and technology. The strategy called for moves on two major fronts: channeling funds for research projects in science and technology, and improving the necessary support structure in the bureaucracy.

Research funds came chiefly from foreign sources and were available to any institutions (not necessarily educational ones) that could show they had the capacity to conduct research in priority fields. Half the projects financed in 1983–88 were carried out by universities, with six institutions accounting for most of this university involvement.

Improvement of the necessary state support structure involved redefining the role and location of COLCIENCIAS as the agency responsible for directing national policy on science and technology; creating national and regional committees for priority fields; and modernizing administrative procedures, to make project handling more efficient.

A second set of measures formulated by the state referred more specifically to the academic development of institutions. The aim of one such measure has been to strengthen post-graduate programs, which were formally defined in the 1980 Reform and regulated in 1991; their development however has always been impeded by the universities' neglect of research, referred to above. In the mid-eighties a project was funded by the Inter-American Development Bank and implemented by ICFES to strengthen the research facilities of seven state universities to enable them to play a more effective part in the science and technology projects.

Since the end of the decade ICFES has also been engaged in setting up a national periodicals library and devising an information system of higher education; these facilities are intended to make up at least in part for the universities' lack of infrastructure. However, both these projects have run into technical and administrative difficulties, which have either led to unsatisfactory solutions as judged by international standards (the information network), or unnecessary delays in construction work (the periodicals library).

At the end of the eighties ICFES organized a full-scale discussion on the quality of higher education in Colombia. Practically all the actors involved took part in the event, as did a good number of international experts. The discussion (Colombia ICFES 1990) had the merit of making higher education once more a priority public issue at a time when it seemed to be viewed as a minor question. ICFES was simultaneously striving to curb indiscriminate approval of new plans and programs of doubtful prospects, and applying legal measures to put a stop to administrative and academic mismanagement in some institutions and programs.

The steps taken by ICFES created more controversy among the actors affected and more headaches for the future than concrete solutions to the problems of the system's quality. The initiative for the steps came from the then director of the Institute and a handful of his senior collaborators, rather than from any medium-term policy of the Institute or any explicit government support.

The eighties — two critical policy areas

There are two critical areas in which state intervention has to deal with certain variables affecting interests beyond the simple sphere of the higher education system. This may be the reason why state measures in these areas during the eighties were either not very consistent (in the case of financial policies) or practically non-existent (policies for modernizing and streamlining public administration in general).

Funding the system

The financial crisis of the eighties was felt throughout the higher education system, but it affected the public and private sectors differently because of the very considerable dissimilarity in their funding. While private institutions finance themselves essentially with tuition fees, state entities are heavily dependent on appropriations from governmental budgets.

Private education is regarded as a public service performed on behalf of the state. The state controls not only the quality of the service the private sector provides but also its price. State financial policy with regard to private institutions of higher education has therefore become limited to ensuring that founders of new institutions endow them with sufficient capital for their operation, and setting ceilings to annual percentage increases in fees. The private universities, for their part, have continually pressed for greater autonomy in fixing their fees in general (and are beginning to achieve this autonomy in the nineties) and have argued every year for higher rates of fee increase.

Given the rising costs of higher education, the outcome of this policy has been that most private institutions, operating in a market unable to afford very high prices for their services, have confined themselves to offering professionalizing courses of study at levels requiring little in the way of infrastructure and taught by barely qualified staff with a high turnover. The better universities have either managed to obtain approval for above average fee increases, or have diversified their activities to include lines of action that are more profitable and less subject to 'price control' by the state, such as work under international agreements or research and consultancy contracts, postgraduate programs and further-training courses sponsored by private organizations.

In the public sector, institutions are supposed to be financed with appropriations from the budgets of the respective administration they belong to — national,

departmental or municipal. In practice, however, local governments contribute very little to the funding of their institutions. Thus in the case of departmental universities, 85% of their expenditures is covered by allocations from the national budget. This means that all public institutions are affected by central government spending cuts. In the seventies national budget appropriations for education in general and higher education in particular grew faster than the budget as a whole. But this trend was reversed in the eighties in respect of higher education, as state funds earmarked for this purpose no longer increased — and at times even decreased — in real terms.

The lack of a consistent financial state policy, together with the public institutions' economic crisis and their inability to raise funds from other sources (departmental allocations and alumni contributions remained substantially unchanged in the eighties), made it necessary for rectors, particularly provincial ones and those with less influence, to spend the better part of time negotiating with the central authorities for funds to get through the academic year without economic emergencies. The unease spread to the intrauniversity associations, with state teachers (whose associations are stronger than the private teachers') often complaining about the loss of purchasing power of their salaries; in a good many cases this led to adoption of salary scales in which such factors as length of service counted for more than actual quality of service. As regards student protest, it has increasingly shifted from national political issues to economic matters concerning students themselves (cuts in budgets for their welfare, and downgrading or elimination of university residence, refectories and health services).

Lastly, despite legal and financial distinctions between the state and private sectors, financial incentives have been provided at various times by the state for eligible institutions from both sectors. In the eighties such incentives consisted of funds for the programs of research and long-distance education referred to earlier. There is also a state agency, ICETEX, which was created to finance studies abroad but which now mainly gives loans (for maintenance and tuition) to students at public or private institutions of higher education in Colombia.²

Administration in the Public Sector

One feature of the state sector that sharply distinguishes it from the private sector is its hobbled administration. Often it is not so much a question of a lack of money as of unsound, sluggish, and at times downright incompetent or, at worst, dishonest management of money.

The state universities are not free from the characteristic defects of the country's public administration system, described by such epithets as 'bureaucracy', 'politicking', 'patronage', and 'administrative corruption'.

So there are different aspects to the problem. In the first place, administrative procedures are slow and inefficient, either because the relevant rules are obsolete or inappropriate (having been designed for other types of state organizations), or

because the people responsible for applying them have no administrative ability (good academics do not necessarily make good executives or managers). And academic work itself is directly affected when administrative operations do not run smoothly, especially in the more innovative management areas: procurement, research, systems networks, faculty exchanges, etc.

In the second place, management of higher education entities is further hampered by the presence of political patronage. As an instrument of reproduction of the political class, patronage directs the administration of public entities toward the needs of local and national political chiefs or 'bosses' as regards obtaining definite and permanent voter support. In institutes of higher education, political patronage has been known to operate from the very time of their creation, as when one or another of the country's smaller and poorer departments have increased their prestige and the possibility of offering employment to supporters of the regime in power by setting up a university of their own. It is therefore not unusual to see academically poor mini-universities being founded that meet few local needs regarding professional development but are very useful to local political leaders as a means of generating loyalty and support through the appointment of rectors, administrators, auxiliary workers, service personnel, deans and, in extreme cases, even teaching staff. In some regions student admissions, too, are controlled by political patronage.

A third aspect of the problem is graft or dishonesty in public administration, which has reached a peak in recent years, particularly in the sectors of health, municipal utilities (water and power), and public works. To what extent has the virus also spread to the state universities? It is difficult to say, for there is no proof or documentation, just a few indications. Moreover, administrative dishonesty is easily brought about and masked by the first two aspects described above. With inefficient rules, who is to say whether hold-ups are caused by the rules or by incompetence or bad faith on the part of employees? If you can traffic in the institution's jobs (political and interest-group patronage), why shouldn't you traffic in its material assets?

In the eighties the hamstrung, halting administration of the state universities was widely regarded as a serious problem requiring urgent solution, especially if the country was to meet the modern challenges of scientific and technological development. Yet no consistent, continuing, effective measures were adopted for the purpose during the decade. Political will can be said to have been lacking, a lack that was in itself a political fact signifying that the correlation of forces between the actors involved was such that interests not in favor of change ultimately prevailed, either because a no-change decision is always easier to carry (the line of least resistance), or because a do-nothing stance would bring them political, interest-group, or simply economic dividends.

Current debate

Current debate on the present situation and future prospects of higher education in

Colombia is ambivalent, particularly about the role of the state. Some analysts impute the system's poor quality to lack of state action for controlling and developing the system. Others, on the other hand, complain of too great a state presence, and advocate a more autonomous system of higher education, with institutions free to decide what type of services (programs and degree courses) they will provide, what their content (curriculum) will be and, subject to the laws of the market, how much they will charge for them (tuition).

This contradiction is understandable within the broader framework of developments in Colombian society at the start of the present decade. These have formed two contexts: one brought about by a series of political events that crystallized into the drafting of a new Constitution in 1991, and the other by the economic policy of the government embodied in the so-called plan for the opening-up of the economy. Thus, while the new Constitution seems to emphasize the role of the state in that, in specifying more clearly the fundamental civil rights, it assigns more responsibilities to the state, the government's economic plan would appear to want to minimize this role in that it seeks to end the paternalistic and protective authority of the state.

The provisions of the new Constitution on education, as on many other matters, constitute more than anything else a declaration of general principles. The significance of these principles for the man in the street will depend on subsequent regulative legislation. But perhaps the greatest significance is to be found in the emphasis placed on the state's role. Education is held to be a civil right, and although the right of private parties to establish teaching institutions is recognized (which confirms the dual nature of the education system), it is the state itself that bears the primary responsibility for satisfying the right to receive an education. In quantitative terms, the length of compulsory basic education is extended from five to ten years; in qualitative terms, education is explicitly given a secular character (no one is obliged to receive religious instruction), consistent with the secular character of the state.

The most explicit reference to higher education underlines once again the responsibility of the state; it stipulates that universities shall be autonomous, and points to the need of special legislation for state institutions (Article 69). It also provides that the academic communities (students and faculty) that make up an institution must have a say in its management.

The government of César Gaviria (1990-94) has continued to implement the science and technology policy initiated in the eighties, and has made it more distinctly a part of the modernization processes needed to prepare the country's production facilities for economic liberalization. In this connection, work is also under way to modernize the state apparatus involved (COLCIENCIAS and the national, regional and sectoral committees) and to channel funds for research and development projects.

The 1991-94 Education Expansion Plan, now incorporated into the governments' development plan, identifies state priorities in the education sector. Although stress is laid on the need to strengthen the universities (especially in the areas of research and postgraduate programs), social spending on education is

clearly not going to be focused on postsecondary education. The Plan even insists on giving ICFES a lower profile by removing its authority to oversee the system of higher education.

Some state universities, for their part, have been making often clearly unpopular efforts to raise tuition fees, without thereby solving their financial problems significantly. The National University, for example, expects to cover only 6% of its total budget with tuition fees once the entire student body is paying fees at the new rates. The new scheme applies to all students entering the University from the second semester of 1991 onward, and offers those admitted before this date three alternative plans to choose from.

But, over and above any specific policy measures, current debate is essentially centered on framing a new university reform that will both correct the defects of the 1980 Reform and translate the principles of the new Constitution into concrete legislation. Discussion of the matter started virtually behind closed doors, with the preparation of a document by a committee of five members appointed by the director of ICFES — a committee that represented not so much the state institutions as political-party and private interests. Publication of the document opened the debate to other actors, with different opinions, including state institutions such as the National University and Valle University (which organized seminars and submitted alternative proposals), the Colombian Association of Universities (dominated by private-university interests), and even the National Federation of Teachers (FECODE).

One of the central topics of the debate has been university autonomy, stipulated in the Constitution. While some people are in favor of extending this autonomy to all institutions of higher education, others maintain that it should be limited to those that can properly be described as universities (not all institutions presently using this title are strictly speaking universities). The concept of university would then have to be defined more rigorously (than it is in the definition provided by the 1980 Reform), in terms of adequate qualifications and time commitment of faculty; diversity of areas of knowledge, including the basic sciences; research capacity, as evidenced by academic production; good masters' programs; and real possibilities of pursuing doctoral studies to completion. Doctoral programs have so far made up an insignificant part of postgraduate studies as a whole. No more than a handful of the existing universities would qualify on these criteria, the rest being universities in name only. Hence the need to recognize the underlying realities of the situation and to establish new sets of parameters to restratify the institutions of the system.

Other key topics of debate have been: the technological or non-university categories of higher education (should they be unified under a single category and officially regulated as a preuniversity cycle, or as a line of professional training fully parallel to the academic line?); the extent of control to be exercised by the state (this issue is connected with defining autonomy and affects the role to be assigned to ICFES); and the Special Statute Regarding the National University. Contradictory positions have sometimes been taken by individual participants in the debate. As a case in point, the Colombian Association of Universities would

like to see the right of autonomy granted to all institutions but feels that the principle of faculty-and-student participation in management should be applied only to public institutions.

Future prospects

The present differentiation in Colombia's higher-education system has one byproduct that is perhaps the most disturbing of all — stratification or vertical differentiation. That is to say, universities in both the public and private sector have come to be ranked in strata or levels as good, bad or indifferent. Segmentation is a problem not only because the quality of the teaching imparted is ranked in differentiated levels or segments, but also because these quality levels are superimposed on and reinforced by a socio-economic stratification that characterizes the entire educational system and the community at large. Discrimination in admission to university ensures access by the most privileged classes to the best universities. This segmentation is a continuation of the segmentation obtaining at secondary-school level and exists even in the public universities. It is not secret that it is not the needy who have the best chances of access to free higher education offered by the state, especially in the most sought-after degree courses. Discrimination at entry is heightened by the different standards of quality of education within the system, and discrimination occurs anew upon graduation since there are differentiated segments of the labor market for the various levels of quality of teaching imparted.

Stratification will no doubt continue to exist in the near future, for a wholly egalitarian society is not going to be attained and academic production is not a purely horizontal or uniform process. What is quite likely to occur, however, is that stratification will be legitimized by recognition of the fact that there are several optimum-quality institutions which are more specialized in the production of knowledge and capable of drawing the other, less qualified components of the system toward higher development. This possibility appears to be suggested by the incipient but still very tenuous formation of a kind of club of top-ranking public and private universities, which would venture together along the doctoral path, would share data bases and information systems, would become the essential link between the higher-education system and a national policy on science and technology, and would moreover have greater autonomy in relation to the state in defining their own academic programs.

If this prospect becomes a reality, it will pose several challenges. In particular, institutions outside the club will need to devise ways of benefiting from the club so as not to fall hopelessly behind in university modernization. Society in general will need to make sure that access to the best universities is provided (through scholarships and loans), and eligibility is based on academic merit rather than on economic or social class.

The system of higher education as a whole will need to establish a flow or transfer between the top and bottom of the system, so that those at the base can benefit in some way from the progress of those at the top.

Notes

1. See, for example, 'Informe de la subcomisión sobre universidad ante la Comisión de Diálogo en el Proceso de Paz', working paper, Bogotá, 1985, and the final report on 'El sistema universitario estatal', submitted to ICFES in 1989 by the Fundación para la Educación Superior y el Desarrollo (FEDESARROLLO), the Corporación Centro Regional de Población, and the Center for Social Studies of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
2. It barely covers 6–8% of all students, when it should finance 50–70% of them (Alfonso Ocampo, 'El mejoramiento de la calidad, eficiencia y la equidad de la educación superior: un propósito nacional. La incidencia de la planeación, del financiamiento y la administración del recurso', in ICFES, *Memorias . . .*, volume III, p. 318).

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