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Policies for higher education in Latin America: the context

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Abstract. Latin American higher education developed since the nineteenth century from the tensions between the Catholic tradition of Iberian colonization and the enlightenment, rationalistic and predominantly French views present in the independence movements, and embodied in the "Napoleonic" institutions established throughout the region. This article discusses how this system evolved, facing the problems of enlarged enrolment, diversification, and the current problems of reform, as alternatives among the poles of bureaucratic, oligarchic and market mechanisms of coordination.

Latin American higher education has been a topic for research and enquiry for some time now, and we know several important things about it.[1] There has been less success in proposing policies for improvement and change, and less still in the implementation of these policies. This article seeks to provide some reflections on the broader context in which policy proposals have been presented and tried out.

1. History

Latin American universities[2] are said to be Napoleonic, which means to be controlled and strictly supervised by the central government according to uniform, nationwide standards. There is also a clear predominance of public, non-confessional universities, in spite of the strong presence of the Catholic Church, and the fact that the first universities were established by the Spanish crown under the Church's control and supervision. The present institutions, most of them created or profoundly transformed after independence in the early 19th century, were built as a reaction against the colonial heritage, including the church and its universities. They were meant to be part of the effort to transform the old colonies into modern nation-states, with professional elites trained according to the best technical and legal knowledge available at the time, and educated in institutions controlled by the state and freed from the traditional religious thinking.

Intentions not always yield the expected results. In contrast to what happened in Germany, for instance, Latin American universities were extremely slow in opening space for empirical research, that could provide support for technical education in the professional schools; in contrast with Britain, there was no place for general education in the liberal arts tradition, which became restricted to the secondary schools, the last bastion of traditional Catholic education; and, in contrast with France itself, very little was developed which could be compared with elite institutions, where high-level professional education could be protected from

the changes and uncertainties of the broader higher education system.

A dominant feature is the weight of the professional schools in law, medicine, engineering, dentistry and a few others. In other societies, these units are often placed outside the main universities, or at least organized independently from the institutions' academic and administrative core, usually more concerned with general education, the humanities and the sciences. Latin American higher education, from its beginnings, was defined almost as a synonym of education for the professions. The centrality of these units has led both to the preservation of some quality (since some of them have good traditions of competent work) and to resistance to innovations that have come from other groups entering the universities and from governments and administrations trying to promote change.

One of the main differences among countries is the presence of European links and, above all, European immigrants in the history of their universities. European links could be established either by Latin American students going to Europe, or by importing European professors and researchers to teach or man local institutions and research centers, with presumably very different outcomes. Places with a strong presence of European immigrants and linkages, such as Buenos Aires and São Paulo, developed very different, and usually better institutions, than those that remained more isolated, such as Mexico or Rio de Janeiro.

Another important difference is the outcome of the Church-State conflict about educational issues, which took place almost everywhere. Mexico and Argentina, with their large, lay national universities, should be seen in contrast with Chile or Colombia, where Catholic and lay institutions were able to survive side by side. Mexico and Argentina also typify the pattern of university systems dominated by a central, national university, in contrast with decentralized systems like Brazil, Colombia and even Chile. These historical differences may help to understand the varying paths taken by each country when faced with the pressures for expansion in the second half of this century. Mexico and Argentina responded by opening up the gates of their national universities, while Brazil and Colombia, and more recently Chile, responded by opening space for the creation of a large number of new, private institutions, Catholic or not.

2. Expansion and change

In all countries, higher education changed very little, if at all, until the sixties and seventies, when they came under irresistible pressures, coming from both internal and external sources, in a context of severe political instability and political authoritarianism.

The more visible and probably less understood of these pressures came from the student movement. Political activism among Latin American students is an ingrained tradition, dating at least from the 19th century law schools, and reaching its first peak with the Cordoba Reform Movement of 1918, that inaugurated the tradition of local autonomy and government through collective bodies of professors, students and alumni. The student movements of the fifties and sixties

hoped to change not only the universities, but the whole society, and evolved into a pattern of confrontation between students and governments which degenerated in many cases into terrorism, violent repression from military governments and guerrilla warfare. For the universities, these movements helped to delegitimize whatever academic traditions they had in the past, and made it very difficult for governments to try policies other than those of repression and confrontation.

Another source of pressure came from a young generation of scholars, many of them trained abroad, who pressed for the establishment of research institutes, departments, research money and full-time work in the traditional universities. Their criticism against the old organizational models and institutions coincided with that of the students, which led many of them to similar patterns of political confrontation, repression and exile. In some countries, those who remained were partially absorbed by the professional schools, or in specially created institutes and research centers; in others they went on to organize their own institutions, with local or international money.

Less conspicuous, but probably more fundamental in its consequences, was the large number of women, elder and poorer persons who started to flood the universities, which were until recently all male, elite institutions for the privileged young. These new groups were either absorbed by the traditional universities or incorporated in new, private institutions, or some combination of both; in either case, enrolment grew at extremely high rates.

Fourth, there was the creation of a new professional group that barely existed twenty years ago, the university lecturer. In most countries, the expansion of higher education led to the hiring of a large number of instructors who were different both from the traditional professor (who got his earnings from private practice) and the researcher (who could raise money from research agencies and research contracts). The university lecturer in Latin American universities organized very quickly in strong professional unions, took the torch of political militancy from the students of ten years before (if they were not the same persons!) and put forward an agenda of employment protection, egalitarian treatment and public financing that blocked most attempts at evaluation, differentiation and administrative rationalization that emerged from time to time. A parallel development was the creation of large administrative bureaucracies in universities, with their own unions and political agendas.

And last, but not least, was the anti-intellectual and anti-academic attitudes of so many Latin American governments, military or not. For them, universities were either irrelevant or a source of nuisance and political trouble. The combination of anti-intellectualism and authoritarianism on the government's side and political mobilization and increasing costs in the universities led to the gloomiest period of Latin American university life, from which it is now trying to recover.

The process of expansion was extremely rapid, and ran its course in a few years, after the massive incorporation of women and working students, leaving a host of new problems and situations. Its most immediate consequences was that higher education became very expensive to maintain, not just because of the increased number of students, but mostly because of the growing number of academic and

administrative staff, and their ability to organize and press for their demands. In most countries, uniform wage policies were established for the whole public sector, and negotiated directly between government and the teachers' unions, bypassing the universities' internal authorities and even the ministers of education. Governments granted more than they could afford, leaving to inflation the task of reducing payment levels until the next round of negotiations. Other countries let the salary levels in public institutions deteriorate, or never implemented policies of full-time employment for academic staff. Another policy was to restrain expansion in the public system as a whole, with some attempts at compensation through the creation of a few high quality, well protected institutions or the stimulus for the development of the private sector.

3. Ethos

An important consequence of these transformations was the further dilution of the academic ethos that somehow existed in a few leading institutions in most countries. The frailty of academic ethos is not mentioned often as an important problem in higher education, probably because of the difficulties in tackling such a diffuse cultural element. Countries having well established higher education institutions today had in the past social groups with strong commitment and interest in cultural and educational activities, which provided their academic institutions with normative and cultural contents that go a long way towards explaining their vigor. In Latin America, as in other regions where governments imported their educational institutions from abroad, these contents sometimes barely existed, in spite of the large number of laws, norms and regulations placed by the educational authorities on the educational institutions. The study of the history of the social and cultural movements associated with educational institutions is the only way to ascertain the presence of such contents, which do not reveal themselves in the legislation, the course syllabus or the academic credentials of professors. When the contents are weak, empty routines and power plays take precedence (formal titles, pay scales, job tenure, institutional power), and the substance of educational work is threatened.

In the past, universities were privileged places for the children of the elites, and the university professor, even if not an academic, was usually a prestigious member of a liberal profession, and transmitted to his students not only the knowledge, but also the attitudes and values typical of his social standing. Now, the universities became flooded with lower middle class students looking for academic credentials in ill-defined professional fields, women furthering their education without clear professional commitments, teachers with no anchorage in the liberal professions or in scientific communities, large and often ineffectual administrative bureaucracies and, in the private sector, educational entrepreneurs coming from unknown places and selling unrecognizable products to an inexperienced market of education buyers. The overall effect of these transformations is very difficult to assess. In very broad terms, many more people have access to education now, the traditional

curricula were opened to new alternatives and experimentation, and in some countries and places, full-time teaching and research were introduced for the first time in higher education. The general feeling, however, is of deterioration and loss of quality, and an idealization of the past.

A fresh perspective into the questions of academic ethos can be obtained through the typology of "cultural biases" proposed by Mary Douglas and developed by Aron Wildavsky and associates.[3] Basically, the idea is to look at culture as functionally related to two main dimensions of the social structure, hierarchy (grid) and group cohesion, or solidarity (group). Applied to the variety of Western academic experiences, Table 1 is obtained.

Table 1. Cultural biases in university systems

	Low Group	High Group
High grid	*fatalism* – confessional universities	*hierarchy* –Napoleonic and German universities
Low grid	*individualism* – English and American traditions	*egalitarianism* – corporatist universities

The main notion to keep in mind is not only that these types are never pure, but that it is precisely the tensions among them that provides the universities with their dynamism. From its origins, the European universities combined elements of strong individualism, corporatist[4] organization and close links with the Church hierarchy. The old universities, however, were something more than channels for the transmission of the teachings of the Church. They were responsible also for the creation of an open space for the development of rational thinking, through the rediscovery of the classic tradition. The universities at the Renaissance developed an international community linked by individuals who travelled among the main cities, spoke a common language, Latin, fought with determination for their ideas, and carved their autonomy regarding the surrounding communities and the Church. Universities where these elements of individualism did not emerge remained simply as branches of religious bureaucracies, and withered away. The Protestant Reform, and later the industrial and bourgeois revolutions, strengthened the individualistic component in the traditional European universities, leading to different accommodations among the religious, political and academic authorities. Spain and Portugal, however, were left out of the three revolutions, which explains why their universities did not follow the same path.

The Napoleonic universities developed in the early 19th century together with the emergence of strongly centralized nation states, which followed, in France, a period of intense revolutionary mobilization centered in the *citoyen* as an individualized subject of the political life, the economy and of reason itself. The German universities developed at the same time, combined with a protestant tradition which placed strong accent on individual achievement and community values, but also in a context of political centralism, in the Prussian state first, and in the Bismarckian regime by the end of the century.

Of the three main European models, England is probably the country where state dominance over the universities was less conspicuous and individualism more stressed in the academic ethos, as another dimension of economic and political liberalism. The French model, however, was the one to be copied in Latin America and in many other countries aspiring to the values of modernization and rationality. What was usually missed, in these adaptations, was the values of individual rationalism and citizenship which were so central to the French revolution, and worked as a counterweight to the constraints of the Napoleonic restoration.

What kept hierarchy and competitive individualism together was the relative isolation of the universities regarding the rest of society, which led to the need to develop protective barriers and a sense of identity and protection against outside interferences and pressures. In Latin America, first among students, and later among teachers and employees, new forms of egalitarian solidarity came to prevail, geared towards the control of financial, political and institutional power within the universities, and displacing, together with the old hierarchical and individualistic cultures, much of their intellectual, pedagogic and ethical contents.

This brief digression on cultural theory suggests that the traditional models of European universities meet strong cultural barriers in their adaptation to the contemporary world, in Latin America as elsewhere, and points to the profound differences in perspective among those who try to carry on with university reforms today. Neither the pressures to make the universities more business-like, at one extreme, or more democratic and egalitarian, at the other, are likely to assure that the universities will be able to produce and transmit knowledge with the same competence as the best of them did in the past. And since the past will not return, the solution adopted by many countries has been to accept that "university" is too broad a term to encompass things so different, and to move in the direction of highly differentiated systems, which could preserve and strengthen their traditional institutions and groups, while opening the space for new manifestations of mass, technical, specialized, vocational, further and other varieties of higher education.

4. Policy and Governance

The current policy problems for higher education can be summarized in three: given its current size and composition, how can higher education continue to be financed, in a context of dwindling public resources and unrelenting pressures for higher expenditures and increasing costs; how to assure its quality, whatever the meaning of this term; and how it could be geared to fulfil the roles it is expected to play to attend to the economic, social and cultural needs of each country. There are other questions to be addressed in this process: how to distribute the benefits of higher education more equitably, how to correct for regional imbalances, how to make the use of public resources more efficient. These are not just "technical" questions, to be handled by a more or less competent administration. They imply deep differences in values and perceptions, and the way they are handled affects different social groups, and can have costly political implications. To deal with these questions, a host of interest group associations, negotiating arenas and

regulatory agencies were established in all countries – teachers' unions, rectors' conferences, educational fora, councils of education at different levels, grant-giving agencies, ministerial departments. Most of the disputes on policies of higher education in the region are not actually about policy alternatives, but about the preliminary question of who is entitled to do what. These disputes have the effect of pre-empting some decisions, and of thwarting the development of managerial competence and administrative skills in agencies submitted to constant political negotiation and bickering.

Besides the policy-setting problems at the national level, the institutions themselves are often unable to pull themselves together to further their own goals. The establishment of stronger central administrations was a trend in all universities which tried to move away from the dominance of the traditional schools and to deal positively with the newcoming actors. Ideally, modernizing administrations should evolve from the reliance on professional schools to the reliance on academic communities, which are the mainstays of modern research universities, and responsible for the "bottom-heaviness" which should be, in Burton Clark's expression, the main feature of academic organizations. The problem for Latin American universities, however, is the weakness of their country's academic communities, and the strength of other sectors. As the administrations freed themselves from the professional oligarchies, they often fell prey to the students', teachers' and employees' unions. In many Latin American universities now the administrative authorities are elected by these groups, sometimes by a one-man-one-vote method, making the administrative seats thoroughly political positions.

This predicament is compounded by ingrained traditions of collective rule. The Cordoba Reform movement of 1918 established the principle of tri-partite government – students, professors and alumni – which in many institutions replaced the traditional professional congregations, and have recently been replaced, again, by assemblies of professors, students and employees. The problem with these collective bodies is not so much their composition, but that they go well beyond what one would expect from legislative bodies. They control the acts of the administration in their minute details, and often at all levels – departments, courses, institutes, schools, universities. Universities' administrators not only have to play politics to be appointed, but have also to play politics to have their acts approved and implemented on a daily basis, making everything slow and complicated.

Governance in private institutions goes often to the other extreme. Central administrators are appointed by the owners (or, in Catholic Universities, by the Church), and usually lack collective bodies to temper and compensate for the top-heaviness that prevails. Sometimes this is a blessing, giving the institutions much more freedom to innovate and to respond to changing conditions and demand of the education market. But, in many countries – like Brazil and Colombia – private institutions cater to the poorer and less demanding social segments, and their freedom of action usually leads to poor products to sell.

No wonder that governance in Latin American academic institutions is so often paralyzed, or unable to put forward policies that go against one actor or another. But the very existence of a plurality of interests and groups opens the space for

institutional leadership. In some places more than others, it is possible to find researchers unhappy with their working conditions, students pressing for better education, professionals concerned with their standards, external sources willing to bring support to new projects and initiatives. The art of governance in Latin American universities, as in any institution, is very much the art of finding and keeping good allies. It is also the art of association. Networking of universities is a new and growing phenomenon everywhere, from National Councils of Rectors to continental initiatives like the Interamerican University Organization. Networks move slowly, but can give leverage for local initiatives, and become important channels for information and mutual support.

5. Finance

In the public sector, the problems of financing tend to overwhelm all others. Ministers of education can distribute money to the universities, in times of abundance, but can hardly ask them to trim their costs in times of scarcity. Professors' and employees' salaries are usually negotiated directly with the unions, and universities are usually not free to establish their own budgets and pay scales. Large investments are exceptional decisions, made by central authorities sometimes with the support of international agencies. This pattern leaves most of the universities' budgets outside the control of their administration, which can only deal with minor, current expenses.

This traditional pattern of rigidity can be circumvented in many ways, and Brazilian institutions have a large experience of doing so. It is possible to diversify the sources of income. Research money can be obtained from research supporting agencies and through research contracts; university real estate can be sold or rented, and the income invested in financial markets; tuition fees cannot be charged for regular courses in most public universities, but can exist for extension work. Different arrangements can be made to receive and manage this money. Non-profit, private corporations have been organized by universities and units within universities to make contracts, receive and invest money, hire staff and pay additional salaries to professors. Arrangements of this kind can lead to questionable practices, if not properly controlled, but can also provide space for initiatives and creativity that would be routinely stifled by conventional procedures.

Financial and administrative flexibility can also be introduced in more conventional ways in public universities. The three public universities of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, work now with a fixed percentage of the state's tax revenues, and give great flexibility and autonomy to its units and research centers to run their own budgets and revenues with independence, keeping control only of the adherence to the general principles of proper bookkeeping. The example of São Paulo suggests that the rigidity in the administration of resources in many Brazilian public universities – and probably also elsewhere – is often a matter of bureaucratic and administrative conservatism and lack of imagination, more than actual legal limitations.

There is a long tradition in Latin America against giving public money to private institutions, and this was actually forbidden by the 1988 Brazilian constitution. There are, however, loopholes, and there is a large system of student credit provided by public corporations that pays tuition for students in the private sector and amounts to a significant subsidy, given the low interest rates and the high number of forfeits.

Tuition in most public universities in Latin America is tabu. In Chile, however, once this tabu was broken, there was no question of going back to free education for all. In Brazil, the selectiveness of public universities makes the charge of tuition a matter of social justice. Still, there is no hope of making Latin American universities self supporting. There is so much one could charge for tuition, there is no philanthropic money that could compensate for the lack of public subsidies, and there are no examples in the world of university systems that can function only with the support of students, or with revenues of its research activities and services.

6. Comprehensive reform

It was typical of some military regimes in Latin America to try out deep changes in their country's higher education systems, very often motivated by short-range – and short sighted – political concerns. They nearly always failed to achieve their main goals, but sometimes introduced changes which proved to be significant and long-lasting. Other reforms were introduced by civilian governments, whether as a reaction against previous military interventions, as in the case of Argentina, or by their own perception of the needs to change.

To take a few examples, Brazil changed its legislation for higher education in 1968, ending the traditional chair system and opening the way for graduate education, the strengthening of academic departments and the creation of research institutes. Colombia followed similar lines. Chile introduced a very ambitious project of regulating higher education through market mechanisms and institutional differentiation in 1981. In Argentina the military stimulated the creation of new universities in the provinces, the expansion of non-university tertiary education and the beginning of a private sector. University autonomy returned with civilian rule in 1984, and the universities went through a "normalization" period aimed at returning to the institutional framework of 1966, which included a policy of open admissions. Mexico began differentiating after 1968, both through provincial institutions and a growing private sector.

The repertoire of reform measures attempted in the last several years is not very large. It is useful to think of them in terms of the typology proposed by Burton Clark for the three main poles of coordination and control in higher education systems, namely the State, the academic oligarchies and the market. One could think of the changes in the last several years as attempts to move the weight of authority among these poles, and it is possible to evaluate the policies and their outcomes in terms of these attempts.

We have seen how Latin American higher education institutions have been from

the beginning organized by the state, along with the Napoleonic tradition, and their history until the last decades has been a constant fight with oligarchies for political control. What "state" means has varied in time and space. It can mean the ministry of education, the treasury department, the civil service administration, the military, or even the Congress, while establishing legislation and approving the national budget. The problem with state control is its inability to fine tune its policies. Governments can pass legislation, send troops and cut or grant budgets, but cannot make institutions organized around skills and personal commitment to perform under command.

The term "oligarchy" does not need to have a derogatory meaning. Good universities have been always ruled from inside, and it is not by chance that the issue of academic and administrative autonomy commands so much attention in this field. The academic oligarchies we are talking about, however, can make a great difference. In the past, Latin American higher education institutions were ruled by life-appointed chair holders, the "catedráticos", very often notable men in the liberal professions. They controlled not just their chairs, but also their institutions' academic senates and congregations. Now there are scientists organized around their societies, unionized teachers, unionized employees, liberal professionals and their associations in the schools of medicine, law and engineering, religious congregations running the Catholic universities, the lobby of education entrepreneurs in the non-religious private sector, and even some remnants of the old student movement. "University autonomy" can mean any combination of these groups – in the last several years in Brazil it has meant the election of academic authorities by the equal vote of professors, students and employees (one third each), and it is difficult to imagine which kind of policy could come out of this arrangement.

The flaws of the State and the stalemates of academic oligarchy have led to the search for the third alternative of coordination, the market, with its compelling logic of cost reduction and the stimulation or entrepreneurship. However, market driven educational institutions are not likely to embark on long-term projects of social relevance and quality. There are no examples of countries with good quality higher education institutions based solely or predominantly on market domination, and it is difficult to imagine that they could exist. "Market competition" can mean different things in higher education, from competition for student fees to competition for academic excellence. The prestigious research universities in the United States, with their competition for endowments of philanthropic money and talented professors, are at one extreme; there is a host of institutions working at the other end, however, selling low-quality education for bargain prices, and there are no mechanisms linking one extreme with the other.

7. Conclusions

This broad overview of the context and main policy alternatives for Latin American higher education can give us some clues about why policies so often go wrong.

Policy initiatives may fail because they try to shift the coordination and control of higher education systems to one of the three poles of coordination, with exclusion of the others; or because they may favor the "wrong" sector within each pole (say, the military, the more traditional professional associations or the tuition market for low quality education). Even if well chosen, none of these poles, in isolation, can carry on a coherent agenda of educational reform, because of the opposition from the others.

This conclusion is not very surprising, but may be important. Policy-oriented studies often take for granted the existence of a free agent – usually "the government" – which can act as it sees fit, given only the limits of their budgets. Governmental policies are normally the result of different and conflicting forces, and to understand the constant jockeying for who can decide what is often more important than identification and evaluation of policy alternatives. Higher education systems require the presence of checks and balances among government, oligarchies and markets to function properly. In the long run, markets can establish healthy competition and patterns of cost-effectiveness and identify demand; governments can establish long-term goals, grant support and define the relative power of interest groups and oligarchies; and these groups, under appropriate conditions, are the only ones who really can know what higher education institutions are about, and what they can do. Policies that take this complex really into account may stand a chance to succeed.

Notes

1. A very incomplete list of references include, in alphabetical order, José Joaquín Brunner, *Educación Superior en América Latina: Cambios y Desafios*, Santiago de Chile, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990; R. Drysdale, *Higher Education in Latin America: Problems, Policies and Institutional Change*, Washington, The World Bank, March 1987; Daniel C. Levy, *Higher Education and the State in Latin America: Private Challenges to Public Dominance*, Chicago University Press, 1986; Juan Carlos Portantiero, *Estudiantes y politicas en America Latina 1918–1938 el proceso de la reforma universitaria*, Colombia, Siglo Veintiuno, 1978; S. Schwartzman, "The Quest for University Research: Policies and Research Organization in Latin America", in B. Wittrock and A. Elzinga, *The University Research System*, Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm, Sweden, 1985; S. Schwartzman, Latin America: Higher Education in a Lost Decade", *Prospects*, 1992 XXI, 3, 1991, 363–373; Juan Carlos Tedesco, *La Juventud Universitaria en America Latina*, Caracas CRESALC, 1986; Juan Carlos Tedesco, *Tendencias y Perspectivas en el Desarrollo de la Educacion Superior en la America Latina y el Caribe*, Paris, UNESCO, 1983, 43 pp; Hebe M.C. Vessuri, "The Universities, Scientific Research and the National Interest in Latin America", *Minerva* 21:1, 1–38, 1966; Donald R. Winkler, *Higher Education in Latin America – Issues of Efficiency and Equity*, Washington, The World Bank Discussion Papers No. 77, 1990.
2. The word "university" will be used in this text as a synonym for "higher education" in all institutional and academic forms and varieties. In fact, most countries distinguish between universities and other higher education institutions, but the boundaries tend to be formalistic and to vary from country to country and time to time.
3. Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990.
4. The term "corporatism" has been used in political science to describe the pattern of social and political organization derived from the Medieval guilds, according to which society is divided in

distinct corporations defined in functional terms, and coordinated by a central authority. In corporatist societies the corporations, as well defined status groups, take precedence over the individual citizen. From its origins, the Western universities have retained some traits of this corporatist nature. The term is now used in common parlance in many Latin American countries to describe the entrenched defense of vested interests by professional and sectorial groups. For an overview, see James M. Malloy, *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977.