

Following the Private Path: Can We Figure This Out?

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Following an international trend, private tertiary institutions are mushrooming like never before in Latin America. Within the last 30 years, private higher education has grown to become very visible in many countries. Private schools in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, for instance, are pushing 70 percent of the total number of institutions. This type of enrollment is in some Latin American countries far outpacing public university enrollment. The natural question is: why? Is the success of private higher education based on its lower entrance requirements or because they offer something more adapted to students' needs? It's probably unfair to put all private universities under the same umbrella. Levy (1986) developed a very simple but useful classification for universities in Latin America that can help. There are "religious" affiliated schools (mostly Catholic) that were the first universities in the region. Then the "elite" institutions developed as countries became better organized (nowadays, they could be either private, religious, or public). And finally, there is the "demand-absorbing" schools that is a new growing group of tertiary institutions that has evolved aggressively during the last two decades. These new small universities are having a big share of the private market and are under scrutiny in the whole region (Silas 2009). But again, what is the main attraction to these small and new tertiary institutions? Moreover, why pay a private institution when students can attend almost-free public and more prestigious universities? Simply put, there is not enough room at public universities for the demand. Many students don't qualify academically to enter public schools. According to some surveys done in Mexico (Oliver 2009), students are looking for ways to get a diploma, regardless of their quality, that would put them into the

mainstream economy. This is a very complex issue that deserves more attention.

Neoliberalism has become a way out for many governments to solve their lack of investment in public education. The growing demand for tertiary education is creating a huge pressure on the Latin American public higher education system. Governments have not been able to provide for the population's training needs. The decline of governmental financial support for the sector is stimulating the expansion of private higher education and also attracting international investors. Public higher education seems to be experiencing a paradigm shift. Interestingly enough, the public system of universities used to be a way to equalize people and give them opportunities to be professionally productive in society. This general purpose is still there, but public higher education is shifting from social purposes to a more research-oriented approach where elite students and professors are key factors to success. As Holm-Nielsen, Thorn, Brunner, and Balán (2005) expressed it,

Students who can afford to pay for high-quality private primary and secondary education are often much better prepared for university entrance exams. Quality differences in basic education and tough admission policies lead to the situation in which affluent students are overrepresented in free public higher education institutions. Ill-prepared students from poor families are left with fewer choices, usually involving paying for education in private institutions that place less emphasis on test scores or forgoing higher education altogether. (p. 53)

Well-funded state universities have, in many cases, the best human resources, and professors from these institutions tend to follow the lead of elite international schools. This is a multifactor issue and can be partially explained as follows below.

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The Mission of Producing Knowledge to Transform Society

One of the main goals for universities is the production of research, besides teaching and service (Boyer 1997). Over the last 30 years, new discoveries have been linked to profit through the commercialization of inventions. This is not only a new way of increasing universities' impact over society but also a vast funding alternative for leading research institutions. Universities seem to be in a race for resources and prestige (Bok 2003). Only a very few universities can be really productive and compete for these alternative sources of funding and prestige. Public universities, especially the elite ones, are being refocused to become more competitive in a worldwide economy. By doing so, they hope to improve society. This is not problematic as long as having a group of leading research universities is but one alternative model among others. The problem is that many universities are trying to copy (Dey, Milem, and Berger 1997) what big league schools are doing without understanding that not all institutions are capable of emulating them and that there should be some other purposes for higher education (Altbach 2002). In other words, research universities should not be seen as the "wannabe" model for higher education altogether. They are a very needed and valid model for post secondary schools. Training researchers is highly necessary, but not all people will follow that path nor does society require it. Although many governments recognize this and establish a broad spectrum of higher education institutions, when it comes to defining parameters of quality and accreditation, research production is the key factor. This is sending a message to administrators and professors that reads something like this: "If you want to become successful, recognized by your colleagues, be promoted, and get funds for your projects, you must publish." The main issue here is that producing highly-selective knowledge requires the best students. As obvious as it may be, it also means that state-funded universities are walking away from less-qualified students who normally are within the lower social stratus. These students need education and they prefer to pay private institutions than be left behind.

Educational Policies to Favor the Whole Society

Since public universities are following the patterns of elite and research universities, a growing number of less qualified students have limited access to public universities. This paradoxical situation is evident throughout many countries in Latin America. For instance, Brazil has a set of well-funded and selective federal universities where only a trained minority, generally from middle and upper classes, can pass the "vestibular" or entrance test. A similar case is observed in Mexico and in some other Latin American countries. Therefore private education, especially the "demand-absorbing" type, is an option for young people who need a diploma. These social inequities require a re-engineering of the whole system—a very difficult thing to do. Poverty reduces the quality of students' elementary and secondary education, so improving social conditions will probably help. But state universities should understand that they can do a lot more for supporting all students, especially those from lower social classes. Perhaps the American community college system is a good model to be studied. Poor and oftentimes less-qualified students can access these institutions and later transfer to a university, finishing a full degree usually with two more years of study. Mexico has implemented some technological institutes but with little success (Oca 2006). One of the main problems is that these institutes are disconnected from universities. It is almost impossible to transfer credits to a full degree institution. Making these programs more interconnected and flexible can help to move students within the tertiary system. It is in this context that private universities are more attractive and, in many cases, a practical way for students to get a degree.

Funding the Public University

In some countries, such as Mexico, the federal and state governments have been investing in creating new tertiary institutions (Oca 2006). But public funding for higher education is not enough to supply affordable education to meet the massive demand. In the whole region there is a lack of a rational use of resources. For instance, the public sector spends almost 90 percent of its budget on personnel and administrative costs (Gacel-

Ávila 2005). Latin American countries need to refocus their resources to avoid inequalities in their societies.

Traditionally, Latin American governments assumed that tertiary education should be owned and controlled by them. But the rising demand for higher education training over the last few decades has led them to accept the neoliberal option and an “exit door” or an alternative to avoid the real solutions. The problem is that neoliberalism is transforming public universities into a semi-private good. The lack of funding is moving universities to be more entrepreneurial and consequently more distant from the social issues that are increasingly complex in the whole region. Public tertiary education should protect less-advantaged students through alternative schools and funding.

Conclusion

The increase of private higher education in the region should not be seen as competition for the public sector. It is actually a natural consequence of policies, re-distribution of governmental resources, and some environmental conditions that have facilitated entrepreneurial undertakings. Private tertiary education can be of great help developing very much needed human resources, if wisely oriented from the public administration.

Knowing that governments have a strong propensity to centralize their decision-making through a heavy bureaucracy, policy makers must look for a comprehensive set of policies that would care for a global development of each Latin America country. Universities should also be making greater efforts to serve different sectors of society, rather than be oriented to a model of professor-researcher at all levels and in all types of tertiary education. In so doing, the parameters defining quality and its measurement will be adjusted to the different needs and purposes universities are trying to serve.

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