

Dilemmas and Challenges For Modernizing Higher Education in Mexico

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Universities' technological autonomy is vital for competing in the global market.

The international debate on university innovations has reached notable consensus around the fundamental problems: coverage, quality and social relevance.¹ There is also agreement on the need to foster reforms to overcome the crisis and on the recognition of the key role that higher education plays in attaining the autonomous technological capability indispensable for competing in the global market. However, fundamental divergences and disagreements arise vis-à-

vis the shape the proposed reform should take and the appropriate measures for promoting these changes.

For example, while there is broad agreement on achieving an appropriate balance between educational supply and demand and on training enough well-prepared professionals, technicians and scientists to meet the challenges of globalized production and management, there is less consensus on the measures needed. Should university systems continue to grow? With what kind of teaching models? Who is responsible for funding university expansion and modernization? Who should

decide on the specific changes to be made? These, among other questions, are crucial in going from a check list of wishes and goals to a concrete program of action.

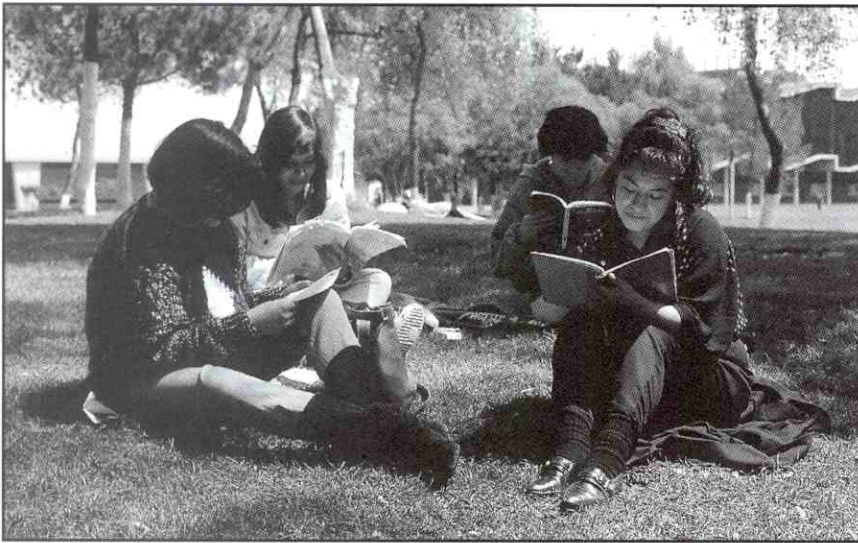
This article will look at some of the challenges for which, in this author's view, the answers cannot be postponed if we are to enter the twenty-first century with stronger, developing universities in Mexico.

Coverage and Quality

The dynamics of university change in the last few decades have included different combinations of size and academic quality: large universities with satisfactory

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quality levels, tiny institutions with shaky standards and those in between. If sometimes educational policy discourse tended to pose the goals of either increasing higher education coverage or improving university quality as contradictory, today it is clear that neither one nor the other can be done without and they both must be worked for simultaneously to consolidate a university system that can compete with the standards in countries of the developed world and recently industrialized nations.



Increased access and better higher education go hand in hand.

Equality and Equity

The objective of equality is related to the ability of the higher educational system to offer opportunities to all those with sufficient academic qualifications, regardless of their social origin, gender or age, or any other social or cultural trait. Equal opportunities demand a continuous balance between the system's volume of supply and demand, a complex requirement given that this equilibrium is pressured by forces and dynamics external to the university: demographics, prevailing edu-

cational policies for primary and middle-level education and the labor market.

But formal equal opportunities are not all there is to the relationship between social inequality and higher education. Intimately related to this is the question of socially equitable education, that is, the series of norms aimed at ensuring at least a minimum of quality in all the establishments doing university training.

With an eye to this goal, it is important to make sure that broadening out

the possibilities of offering higher education (a process that generally has compensated for the difficulties in university expansion) does not stoke the fires of the different forms of social fragmentation existent in an institutionally differentiated system.

Institutional Diversity

The institutional diversification now underway, derived from processes of both privatization of educational services and functional specialization within the system,

has been a safety valve for financial restrictions on public universities, as well as an answer to the many social and economic demands placed on higher education. However, repeatedly, institutions have been allowed to exist that have unsatisfactory quality levels. Appropriate bodies and accreditation procedures for authorizing these sorts of institutions must be created and strengthened to periodically evaluate their functioning and authorize the issuance of certificates and degrees. The accreditation of socially legitimate agents for doing this (government bodies, university structures and nongovernmental institutions like professional associations and alumni organizations) are relevant in this discussion.

Regional Development

Undoubtedly universities transform their surroundings. Setting up a university affects the value of the land around it, urban infrastructure, local culture and, of course, the labor market. In this sense, besides being magnets for educational demand, universities are potential poles for regional development. Orienting strategies to decentralize and deconcentrate available educational facilities with this in mind, and at the same time avoiding the traditional trap of deciding funding on the basis of a need to bring historically depressed areas up to par, implies setting a course for investment that would establish high quality university facilities in different regions. This policy would make it possible to deal with the problem of the saturation of traditional majors and contribute to a better distribution of the market for professions nationwide. In addition, however, it would also be an opportunity to distribute highly qualified academics, both professors and researchers, outside Mexico City.

Internationalization

Despite the fact that the university already has solid international components, given the interaction among academics of different nationalities and the tradition of academic cooperation and exchange among the world's main institutions of higher learning, today the imperatives of internationalization transcend conventional formula for cooperation among institutions and academic groups. The challenge is in offering tools and link-ups to the student and academic communities so they can take part in and travel fluidly through multilingual and multicultural scenarios. In this sense, it would be desirable to change curricula to include more foreign language courses geared to undergraduate and graduate students as well as professors and researchers. But it is also important to disseminate the principles of tolerance and multicultural understanding.

Flexible Curricula

Making the university live up to the demands of today's world means substantive changes in course content (what is taught and why), teaching methods and procedures for transmission of knowledge (how things are taught), very particularly in evaluation and certification of learning, a field in which even on the verge of the twenty-first century, extremely old and certainly out-of-date pedagogical traditions prevail. In order for higher education to effectively modernize and reach a superior level of development, it must be part of daily teaching and learning, making it possible to offer students a gamut of educational options through flexible curricula, as well as by fostering the value of updated, on-going education as intrinsic

needs of the academic and professional ethos.

Integration

One of the main challenges to university systems is the need to achieve greater integration of: a) all institutions that now form part of the higher education system (intrasystemic integration); b) the higher education system, the rest of the national educational structure and scientific and technological research bodies (inter-systemic integration); and c) our educa-

inevitable, but also tends to multiply current capacities.

Financing

Better quality and more capacity for satisfying demand depend on broadening out financing. The question is problematic if we take into account the economic recession our region is going through. However, it is absolutely imperative that we think about and experiment with new ways of relating to private companies and the public sector, of recovering



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tional system internationally through agreements with universities abroad in the framework of regional integration accords (international integration).

On both a microsocial level—interaction among individuals and groups—and the macrosocial level—involving all relationships among organizations—integration is fundamental given the changes in the way academic work is organized, today undoubtedly oriented toward new community forms wherein globalization of knowledge is not only

enrollment costs through scholarship-loan programs and other options and venturing into the market with university services like clinics and hospitals, consulting and advisory services, computer management, technological designs and patents, among others.

Evaluation and Innovation

The evaluation of yields and productivity is already an essential component of the academic process. Evaluation has been specifically linked to routine tasks of

supervision and control, procedures for selective stimuli and, in some cases, to functions of accountability for budgets and spending.

However, evaluation takes on a new meaning at the moment in which it fosters and orients innovations needed to keep up to date and improve the system and its components. In this sense, functional and structural links should be forged between tasks of evaluation and university innovation.

Governability

If we understand by university governability² the set of political relations that are both "internal" (between authorities and actors in academic life) and "external" (between the university and the bodies, groups and sectors of civil society, as well as the public sector), we can see that the long preeminence of the university-state relationship begins to stop leading the way in defining the priorities and strategies for change. In its place we see the advent of a much more complex fabric of relationships in which not only do the traditional actors of university politics take part, but also that there is a long list of emerging actors: political parties and groups, non-governmental organizations, businessmen, professional associations, ecclesiastic organizations, social movements, etc.

The ability of the university to create stable and productive links that can answer the new demands and responsibilities of today's society is a factor of major importance in the institution's transformation. The apparently paradoxical for-



Universities are responsible for improving the quality of knowledge.

mula of combining more autonomy and closer ties³ forces universities to design new instruments to satisfy the demands of society and the state at century's end.

Social Relevance

While universities cannot guarantee their graduates jobs, it is their responsibility to contribute to the formation of a more flexible labor market. Diversifying and recreating professional training, improving quality and the applicability of knowledge, encouraging ongoing education, designing alternatives for a constantly growing demand, orienting those at university toward entrepreneurial activities and production instead of waged employment as their only option are some ways forward, tasks that the universities can perform to break the vicious circle of current trends. ■■■

NOTES

¹ During the 1990s, the discussion about crises, processes and alternatives for universities has been a priority in studies of higher education systems worldwide. In Latin America, there are abundant documents, books

and articles on these questions. Particularly relevant are the CEPAL-UNESCO text, *Educación y conocimiento: Eje de la transformación productiva con equidad* (Santiago de Chile: UNESCO, 1992); World Bank, *Higher Education. The Lessons of the Experience* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1994); UNESCO, *Policy Paper for Change and Development in Higher Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995); as well as the anthologies by Salvador Malo and Samuel Morley, eds., *La educación superior en América Latina. Testimonios de un seminario de rectores* (Washington, D.C.: Interamerican Development Bank and Unión de Universidades de América Latina, 1996), and by Rollin Kent, comp., *Los temas críticos de la educación superior en América Latina. Estudios comparativos* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Universidad de Aguascalientes and FLACSO-Chile, 1996).

² On this question, Orlando Albornoz' article, "La reinvencción de la universidad: los conflictos y dilemas de la gobernabilidad en América Latina y el Caribe," is fundamental. Malo and Morley, eds., op.cit.

³ See CEPAL, op.cit.

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