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Global trends and their impact on Latin America: the role of the state and the private sector in the provision of higher education

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Global trends and their impact on Latin America: the role of the state and the private sector in the provision of higher education

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Abstract

This paper examines the private/public debate and the role of the state in the provision of higher education in the Latin American region with a particular focus on Chile. Drawing on data on participation, access and research production in higher education, this paper describes and reflects on the ways in which the state and the private sector in the region respond to both some global tendencies – such as the massification of the higher education system and international rankings – and the local needs and demands of equity.

This paper particularly focuses on Chile as a paradigmatic case of neoliberal policies in higher education. The case of Chile illustrates the growth and strengthening of the private sector in the provision of higher education as well as the low profile that the state has had in both the funding and the quality regulation of the higher education system. This situation led to a point of no return in 2011 when thousands of university students protested, calling for a high quality and free education for everybody.

This paper will also offer some reflections on, and implications for, public policies and the future of the higher education system in the Latin American region.

The massification of higher education and other global trends: questions and tensions

The massification of higher education has continued in recent years, entering a new phase. Whereas affluent countries of the west underwent massification some time ago, developing countries are now also rapidly increasing their levels of participation in higher education. This is the case for countries in central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa (World Bank 2013).

In analysing the massification in higher education, a series of issues need to be addressed. One is the question over the purpose of higher education. Why is it important that more people access higher education? What are the main benefits for the country, the institutions of higher education and the individuals themselves? A common response is that access to higher education promotes social mobility (Altbach and Knight 2007; Marginson 2006; Smeeding and Haveman 2006; Clark 1960); therefore, the more people who access tertiary education, the better for both individuals (since they can gain higher salaries and a better standard of living) and the country (since it gains better educated citizens who can also contribute to the social and financial growth of their country). Recent literature has focused, for instance, on higher education as a public good for the public good (Barnett 2015; Marginson 2012, 2011). From this perspective, the traditional university tasks of research and teaching might be conceived as oriented to the public good. On the one hand, the production of knowledge benefits the whole society (the health sector, the environment, the understanding of our society and so on) and, on the other hand, the teaching task educates and forms professionals who will contribute to the development of a country – not only in terms of labour force but also in terms of social growth and democratic development.

Massification in higher education has also raised a question over who offers and pays for this educational service. As long as the demand for higher education increases, more provision in the sector as well as more resources are needed to fulfil this demand. Before the 1960s, when accessing university was a privilege for a small elite, the state was mainly able to finance higher education. However, since participation rates have grown around the globe, the state has been struggling to cover this expense and, in many countries such as New Zealand, Australia, South Korea, Chile, the USA and Colombia (OECD 2015), families have assumed this burden. As a consequence of the high demand for higher education and the incapacity of the state to respond to this demand and to cover higher education costs, the private sector in higher education has been expanding. This is especially so in countries in which state regulation of higher education is less, or where the state is not wealthy enough to finance expenditure in higher education. This is the case in many Latin American countries such as Perú, Colombia, Chile and Brazil, although each country presents its own particularities. Particularly in Chile, a country with a high participation in the system (similar to other OECD countries), the state – which historically has financed both state and private universities (Bernasconi 2015)

– has experienced an explosion of private universities and a strengthening of professional institutes since 1980, and a pronounced decrease in state funding. As a result, both state and private universities are competing to generate income through students' fees (increasing the number of undergraduate students and multiplying their campuses), to diversify higher education services and to 'capture' state funds (Bernasconi 2015; Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett 2013). This is a well-known phenomenon in other parts of the world that has been described as the 'entrepreneurial university' (Etzkowitz 2004; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Clark 1998).

Massification processes in higher education have also involved a series of tensions related to access and quality. Clark (1960) refers to the tension between a broader access and the quality of education. According to Clark (op. cit.) when access broadens, only a few students are able to access high quality education or top universities. Relatedly, the stratification of the system and the differentiation between prestigious and selective institutions (the so-called 'world-class' universities) and the majority of institutions emerge as important problems that are being reflected in the development of national and transnational public policies. Nowadays, many countries are investing public funds to position some of their universities in the world rankings. And private universities have also followed this path. Becoming a world-class university enables a university (state or private) to form a branding strategy to attract more income and to exercise power in many ways (political, economic, technological and intellectual). Many universities expect, therefore, to become a world-class university well positioned in the rankings. The problem here is that occupying the best ranking positions is a possibility for only a privileged few. Another tension stems from being labelled a 'second-class' university. In Latin America, for example, questions arise about the quality of the educational service. In Chile, there have been some scandals in recent years when it was discovered that some private universities obtained their accreditation by suborning members of the board of the quality assurance agency.

A general overview of the Latin American higher education system

It is difficult to refer to the 'case' of higher education in Latin America because of the diversity and disparity across countries that compose the region (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Bernasconi forthcoming). Although Latin American countries share a common historical background, there are financial, ethnic, and cultural issues that need to be taken into consideration when addressing the higher education system. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw on data that offer a general picture of the higher education system in the region.

Currently, the Latin American region has a population of over 600 million inhabitants and most of its citizens are a mix of indigenous and either Spanish or Portuguese people. The largest countries are Brazil (with more than 200 million inhabitants) and Mexico (with more than 100 million inhabitants). Regarding the gross domestic

product (GDP), Chile has the highest (23,564 dollars per capita), followed by Argentina (22,375 dollars per capita), Uruguay (21,719 dollars per capita), and Mexico (18,335 dollars per capita) (World Bank 2014). It is in the Latin American region that it is possible to find several of the most unequal countries in the world (with a GINI Index above 50 per cent) along with Africa (World Bank 2013). The most unequal countries of the region are Honduras (53.7 GINI Index), Colombia (53.5 GINI Index), Brazil (52.9 GINI Index), Panama (51.7 GINI Index) and Chile (GINI Index 50.5).

During the colonial period, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, several universities were created by the crowns of Spain and Portugal which were closely connected to the Catholic church (Arocena and Sutz 2005), reaching a number of 25 universities by the end of the colonial era (Levy 1986). Currently there are more than 8,000 higher education institutions of which around 3,000 are universities (approximately 1,000 are state universities and 2,000 are private universities). Some of the largest universities can be found in this region, the so-called 'mega-universities' (Jung 2005): the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), both with more than 300,000 students, and the Universidad de Guadalajara, with more than 200,000 students.

In the following section, some data about student participation, enrolments in private higher education institutions, government expenditure per student, number of higher education institutions, completion rates, rankings, research outcomes, and human resources are provided.

Student participation, stratification of the system and government expenditure in higher education

In general, data show a fast growth in student participation (World Bank 2013). This fast growth is testimony to the increasing number of enrolments in the sector. According to the Regional Review Report on Education for All (Unesco 2015), Argentina and Chile are leading this growth, followed by Barbados in the Caribbean.

Regarding students' participation in private higher education institutions, less than 20 per cent of students in Cuba, Uruguay and Bolivia are enrolled in private institutions while in countries such as Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru and Brazil more than 60 per cent of the population are enrolled in private institutions. In Chile and Paraguay, this percentage increases to more than 80 per cent of students (CINDA 2015).

In analysing the percentage of a population (25 years old and over) who are holders of an undergraduate degree according to income (http://www.siteal.iipe-oei.org/base_de_datos/consulta#), it is possible to find a general tendency across the region for the majority of students who access higher education to belong to the richest families – compared with a low percentage from low-income families. In

Chile, for example, the percentage of the richest students trebles that of the 20 per cent poorest (Paredes 2014). Also, completion rates are low in the whole region, especially in the case of indigenous, black and rural people (the poorest population) (World Bank 2009).

With respect to the government expenditure per student (as a percentage of GDP per capita), we find that Mexico and Brazil are the countries which spend the most on higher education, with 37.3 per cent (World Bank 2011) and 28.5 per cent (World Bank 2012) respectively. The countries with the lowest expenditure in the region are: El Salvador (11.2 per cent) (World Bank 2011), Chile (15 per cent) and Argentina (15.4 per cent) (World Bank 2012).

Rapid growth of higher education institutions and quality assurance

As a consequence of the rapid growth of participation rates, the number of higher education institutions has rapidly increased in the region. For example, between 2004 and 2011, the number of Brazilian universities increased from 224 to 284 (a 27 per cent increase). In Argentina, between 2003 and 2012 there was an increase from 42 to 51 universities (a 21 per cent increase) and in Paraguay, between 1989 and 2013 there was an increase from one to eight universities (a 700 per cent increase). In Mexico, 140 new universities were created between 2006 and 2012, while in Peru and Venezuela there has been an increase in public universities over this time period (21 new public universities in Peru and 20 new public universities in Venezuela) (CINDA 2015). In Chile, 28 new private universities were created between 1982 and 1997 (Cruz-Coke 2004).

Due to this increase in the number of higher education institutions, in the 1990s most of the countries in the region implemented reforms to evaluate and regulate the quality of these institutions (Villanueva 2010; Acosta Silva 2002), either through the establishment of accreditation agencies (Chile, El Salvador and Colombia, for example) or quality evaluation systems (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica and Cuba). Most of these evaluation programmes have been oriented to assessing the quality of undergraduate levels, and, more recently, institutional levels and postgraduate programmes.

Rankings, research productivity and human resources

Latin American universities are not performing well in international rankings. No university in the region is within the best 100 universities in the world and only Brazil has positioned one of its universities (Universidade de São Paulo) within the top 150 according to the Shanghai ranking, followed by the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) (Argentina) (between 151st-200th place). According to the QS World University Ranking, the Universidad de Buenos Aires is performing best in the region (124th place), followed by the Universidade de São Paulo (143rd place), the

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (160th place) and the Universidad Católica de Chile (170th place).

Regarding research outcomes and research development, several indicators again show that universities in the region are not performing well. For example, research outputs are low in the whole region with only one exception: Brazil, a country which is positioned in 15th place in the world (SCImago Journal and Country Rank 1996-2014). Behind Brazil, we find Mexico (29th place), Argentina (32nd place), Chile (45th place) and Colombia (53rd place). Regarding the Science Citation Index 2011 (CINDA 2015), Chile leads the group with 431 citations followed by Uruguay (294) and Argentina (275). The countries of the region with the lowest citations are Honduras (16), El Salvador (15) and Guatemala (14). Most of the citations are in specialised areas of science such as agriculture, natural sciences, microbiology, ecology and environment. And most of the research is conducted in mega universities (20 per cent of research) (CINDA 2015).

Regarding the gross domestic expenditure on research and development as a percentage of the GDP (OECD 2015), Brazil is top of the list (1.1 per cent) followed some way behind by Argentina (0.585 per cent), Mexico (0.541 per cent), Chile (0.363 per cent) and Uruguay (0.23 per cent). All of these countries are far behind, for example, the US (2.806), Australia (2.128) and the UK (1.625).

Regarding human resources, there has been a rapid growth in the number of academics between 2000 and 2011. For example, in Argentina there has been an increase from 26,420 to 50,340, in Colombia from 4,011 to 8,675, and in Mexico from 22,228 to 46,125. The amount of researchers per 1,000 people (of an economically active population) in Latin America and the Caribbean is 1.1, while in the USA and Canada it is 9. Most of the researchers are concentrated in four countries Brazil (51.5 per cent), Argentina (18.5 per cent), Mexico (17 per cent) and Colombia (3.2 per cent). Finally, in relation to the number of academics with PhDs, we find low percentages across the region (for example, 8.7 per cent in Argentina; 9.7 per cent in Chile; 6.8 per cent in Colombia; 9.6 per cent in Mexico) (CINDA 2015).

In analysing the data presented here, it is possible to identify some key tensions and challenges emerging in the region. The first one is related to the demand for higher education and the increase in student participation. There has been an increase in the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions since more and more young people are wanting to fulfil the dream of a better quality life and social mobility. As a consequence, there has been an explosion in the number of higher education institutions which offer both undergraduate programmes and postgraduate programmes. In some countries, governments have created more state institutions to respond to this demand. However, since the state has not always been able to meet this demand, the private sector is taking an important role in increasing enrolment rates and it has reached a point where, in countries such as Chile, a majority of students are enrolled in private institutions. In this case, the private sector has

overtaken the state in the provision of higher education. Conversely, in some other countries (Perú and Venezuela, for example) the state has invested in strengthening the public higher education system by creating more state higher education institutions.

A second issue is related to access to higher education and equity. A regional trend is that richest students have broader access to the system. This is the result of the general inequality and the gap between rich and poor that the region exhibits. This inequality expresses itself not only in access but also in the type of institution to which students have access. Thus, in countries such as Brazil, Chile and Mexico, through a pyramidal model, most of the poorest students access non-selective institutions while the richest students access the most prestigious and selective institutions (either state institutions such as in Brazil or private institutions such as in Chile). In addition, we find – for example in Chile – that several massive private universities have been struggling to certify their quality (Mönckeberg 2013). As a response to this inequality, in several countries governments and a group of higher education institutions have implemented affirmative actions. In broad terms, these programmes are focused on vulnerable secondary schools and they provide both academic and socio-emotional support to the best students of a cohort through courses of a variable duration that are given by universities. Once these students have attended and approved these courses, they are able to enrol in a university.

A third issue is related to research and development. As described above, although the higher education system has grown both in the number of institutions and in widening participation, institutions are not strong in terms of research outcomes. This might be explained by several factors, the most important one being the low state investment in research and development across the region. The latter is understandable in the poorest countries of the region where the GDP is low but it is inexplicable in countries such as Chile – a country with the highest GDP in Latin America and the only South American country which is part of the OECD group of countries. Similarly, it is less explicable in Argentina (a country which is currently in negotiations to become an OECD country), Uruguay and Mexico – three countries that are the richest countries in the region according to their GDP. When comparing these data among these countries, we find that only Brazil is making financial efforts to invest more on research and development and this has clearly had effects on research outputs, journal citations and global innovation indexes. Another effect is related to the low amount of researchers (most of them in Brazil) and human resources and academics with PhDs (a continuing challenge in the region).

The case of Chile

As mentioned, in analysing the higher education system in Latin America, Chile calls for attention for several reasons. Chile has a massive higher education system with a total of more than one million students, including those at universities, professional institutes (PI) and centres of technical formation (CTF) (both public and private) – the

proportion of students in these two last categories of institutions reaching almost 40 per cent of the total number (CNED 2015). The country's gross enrolment ratio at the tertiary level (as a percentage of the total population who left secondary school within the last five years) is 79 per cent (World Bank 2013). There are 16 state universities and 44 private universities, and 80 per cent of students are studying in private universities. Regarding PI and CFT, most of the students are enrolled in the two biggest PI (AIEP and DUOC-UC), both of which are private institutions (CNED 2015).

Chile exhibits, therefore, one of the most privatised higher education systems in the world, jointly with South Korea and the UK according to the OECD (2009). In several cases, these private institutions are for-profit institutions, an issue that has brought controversy and debate to the country since universities, by law, are not allowed to make profit. Nevertheless, many private universities have got around this restriction by setting themselves up as property companies that lease their premises to the universities. On the other hand, most of the professional institutes and CFT are for-profit institutions (and this explains the rapid increase in these kinds of institutions).

Another element to take into consideration is that Chile has one of the highest levels of university fees in GDP per capita terms (OECD 2014). Chilean students and their families assume most of the financial burden: Chilean families finance 73 per cent of higher education (compared to an average 16 per cent for other members of the OECD (2009)). In order to pay these fees, around 70 per cent of students ask for loans carrying debts, which could reach £62,000 within 20 years. In the case of students of traditional universities¹ (both private and state universities), these loans are administrated by the state. In the case of students of post-1980 universities (private universities), these loans are managed by private banks.

Regarding the role of the Chilean state in financing the higher education system, the direct state spending in universities is an average of 15 per cent of the total spending in higher education compared to an OECD average of 69 per cent. During the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), a double state financing system was created. Direct state funding aside, the state rewards those higher education institutions that attract the highest scores in the national examination entrance test. As a consequence, throughout the years the most prestigious universities (mainly private universities with the exception of the University of Chile and the Universidad de Santiago de Chile) have been able to capture more public funds, so some private universities receive more money from the state than state universities themselves (21 per cent versus 15 per cent) (Contraloría General de la República 2012). This system has exacerbated the power and prestige of the most important universities in Chile (the University of Chile and the Catholic University of Chile) while most of state

¹ Traditional universities are those created before 1980s. This group of traditional universities are composed of nine private universities and 16 state universities.

universities have become increasingly weak and today are barely able to finance their most basic operations through students' fees and the diversification of services.

Other elements which are important to take into consideration when analysing the Chilean case and which are a legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship are those inspired by a series of principles originating in the Chicago School of Economics (Taylor 2006). These ideas promote the shrinking of the role of the state in the provision of public services jointly with the strengthening of the private sector.

Historically, the state has financed traditional private universities (mostly Catholic universities). Until 1973 (before the coup d'état) the state financed around 90 per cent of the operating costs of both state and private universities (Parada 2010). This direct funding suffered a severe cutback during the dictatorship and has continued to diminish since, reaching less than 10 per cent in some state universities today.

Also, during the Pinochet regime state universities were seen as a threat to the stability of the regime (Garretón 2005) so they were disarticulated in 1980. Instead of having a large state university (the University of Chile, with several branches across the country) several regional state universities were created. All these new state regional universities (with the exemption of the University of Chile) receive little state funding, struggle to survive and attract students, and are more focused on professional formation than on research (they have neither financial resources nor specialised human resources to conduct proper research).

Additionally, during the Pinochet regime and until 2006, the state did not create a quality assurance system (accreditation process) for higher education institutions. This situation provoked a deregulation of higher education institutions and saw the emergence of dozens of new private higher education institutions with low quality standards. And even after its establishment, this accreditation system has not worked properly. On the one hand, some new private universities – which have obtained the accreditation seal through bribery (Mönckeberg 2013) – have been offering educational services of a doubtful quality and, on the other hand, some other new private universities have been using the status of accreditation to obtain public funds (accredited institutions can apply for public funds to cover some of their operations).

Analysing the private/public divide in the higher education system

In this paper, I have illustrated and described important data that characterise some of the most illustrative cases of higher education systems in the Latin American region with a special focus on the case of Chile, since it represents an extreme case of privatised higher education.

The ways in which some higher education systems in Latin America have been taking shape, especially in countries where the private sector has gained traction, show the type of relationships between the state and the private sector, the market and the consumers of higher education (those students who expect to obtain a degree).

During the time when access to higher education was available only to a select few, the state generously financed almost 100 per cent of higher education institutions. In the face of the demand for higher education, the state has behaved in ways that usually combine one or more of these different possibilities: it has decided to directly provide more higher education by creating state institutions (fully funded by the state); it has allowed the creation and proliferation of private higher education institutions (without state funding) to cover students' demands; and it has contributed to financing (from a greater or a lesser extent) both private and public institutions either by transferring funds to these institutions or by subsidising students (through scholarships or loans managed by the state). At the same time, the role of the state in regulating and certifying the quality of higher education services has moved from a complete lack of regulation (before the 1990s) to the establishment of evaluation systems which still need to be improved.

Meanwhile, the market of higher education has exponentially grown and diversified. More students and their families expect to have access to higher education and there has been a diversification in the offer: more degrees and more institutions available in the market. However, not all these institutions of higher education enjoy the same status or prestige (either for historical reasons or because of their research status and academic productivity) and this has led to a situation in which only few students can access the most prestigious and selective universities (usually students from wealthy backgrounds). Students with lower cultural and social capital largely enter non-selective institutions that open their premises to all who can pay for their studies but do not always offer a high quality educational service. Therefore, the choice of studying in certain institutions is not a real choice but a conditioned one, that usually depends on the cultural and social capital of the students and their socio-economic position. The debate over access to higher education in Latin America therefore needs always to be accompanied by the question, 'access to what quality?' Thus the problem of stratification in the higher education system (which reflects the inequalities in the region) is more present than ever.

Looking at the higher education systems in Latin America and the global trends in higher education, it seems that the private sector will continue to strengthen and offer more educational services while the scarce state funds will continue to meet consumers' demands under a model of a quasi-market (Le Grand 1991; 2011). According to this model, the state subsidises students through supporting a limited educational service, more than subsidising other activities such as research, extension or a full campus experience. If students want access to extra benefits they have to pay for them and this will depend on their capacity to pay. Higher education institutions, therefore, are diversified according to the experiences they offer and the

segment of the society they are focused on. In each of these segments, higher education institutions have to compete to attract students and generate more income.

The debate around the public and the private, not only in higher education in Latin America but across the globe, is developing and will continue to raise questions about the roles of both the state and the private sector and whether or not the state should subsidise private institutions. At the same time, more discussion is needed over the place of markets in higher education, the extent to which higher education can be conceived as a truly public good or rather as a commercial service, and the role of the state in the provision of higher education. What is clear, though, is that – at least in Latin America where the gap between poor and rich remains very high – this debate also needs to address the issues of a high quality education and affordability. In other words, a public/private debate without taking into consideration the inequities in the region seems infertile.

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