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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines changes in values and practices that are emerging in Mexican higher education, reviewing recent trends and policy dilemmas affecting colleges and universities in Mexico. It argues that the educational reforms carried out in the early 1990s indicate the movement away from a social welfare model of higher education, built around political negotiations between government and administrators, unions, and student federations, to a developmental model which emphasizes the themes of efficient management, educational relevance, and technological transfer. The paper also examines policy dilemmas in Mexican higher education, such as clarity of purpose, improvement versus accountability, institutional capacity to implement reforms, funding mechanisms, the blurring of public and private funding, accreditation of private institutions, and the internationalization of higher education. It concludes by arguing that more definite steps toward deeper and more lasting institutional reform are yet to be taken in order to anchor current reforms in technical competence, effectiveness, accountability, and stakeholder development. Contains six references. (MDM)

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# HIGHER EDUCATION IN MEXICO: THE TENSIONS AND AMBIGUITIES OF MODERNIZATION

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## Introduction

Public policy toward higher education in Mexico has gone through important changes in the 1990's. During the crisis years of the 1980's the much heard lament was low salaries, restricted governmental funding, and loss of prestige of public universities. More recently, one hears government officials, university rectors and department heads picking up on the optimistic chant of modernization which stresses raising quality, improving efficiency and above all making education more *relevant* to economic development.

In this paper, I shall look at some of the changes in values and practices that are emerging in Mexican higher education. The discourse of reforms carried out in the 1990's proclaims that we are moving from a *social welfare* model of higher education, built around political negotiations between government and corporate actors within the higher education system (especially unions and student federations), to a *developmental* model which would emphasize themes such as efficient management, relevance for the labor market and technological transfer. At the level of the State, there has been a continuous effort since the mid-1980's to abandon the centralized, semi-authoritarian political system that was inefficient and weak in policy capability in favor of a leaner but more capable state that would be able to steer an increasingly differentiated higher education system around development objectives. This trend is very recent and it goes against the very texture of Mexican higher education. Therefore, it is too early to pass judgment on its actual effects. But I will try to give you a general understanding of recent developments in what Mexicans call the *modernization* of higher education.

As I see it, the overarching question to ask is how an academically weak system organized around political forms of regulation may come to build a new agenda in terms of quality and relevance for a nation of 95 million people that is going through significant economic and political reforms and as well as unforeseen tensions and conflicts. To use Burton Clark's terminology, Mexican higher education is not *academically bottom heavy*: it comes from a weak academic base, and its amateur management structures were more given to political games than to developing academic strategies. Thus, the main policy dilemma would seem to be the development of new stakeholders interested in the process of innovation and restructuring higher education into a competitive and high quality system in the medium term.

First, a brief overview of the recent history of Mexican higher education is in order.

## Recent Trends

The 1970's were a period of unregulated expansion: enrollments went from 212,000 students in 1970 to 730,000 in 1980 under a mechanism of benign government funding. There was no regulation with regard to quality standards, research productivity or financial accountability. The government's main outlook was to use educational expansion as a form of social welfare -- providing free higher education for the emerging middle and lower middle class -- and as a means

of negotiating political stability with the increasingly restless opposition groups within universities.

Accelerated growth forced institutions to hire professors and ancillary personnel at an exhausting pace: whereas in 1970 there were about 25,000 professors (most of which were part timers), in 1985 this figure had surpassed 100,000. That is, every year for a decade and a half about 5,000 young people were hired to work as university teachers. The lack of established postgraduate institutions and the tradition of regarding the *licenciatura* (first degree) as sufficient training for a university instructor meant that most of these new academics were in a position to barely replicate the existing state of knowledge through instruction but hardly to produce new scholarship through research. Additionally, this new academic workforce brought unionism with it, thus facing the universities with higher costs and unforeseen types of conflict and negotiation over hiring and promotion rules. The new academic profession was composed, then, of thousands of young people who returned to teach at the same universities from which they had only recently graduated without having experienced graduate school, research or further socialization in philosophically or educationally sophisticated settings (Gil, Gediaga, Pérez Franco, et al., 1994).

The oil-exporting economy of the 1970's and increasing foreign indebtedness allowed the government to finance this surge in a way that few other Latin American countries had been able to do. Federal funds payed for salaries and for the growing number of institutions: in 1970 there were 54 public institutions (both universities and technological institutes), but by 1980 there were 105 and in 1990 they had grown to more than 140 institutions. The private sector also began to grow significantly, pushing the number of institutions from 34 to 103 in the 1980's (doubling again by 1990). Institutions proliferated in the provinces, allowing access to young people in regions that had been excluded from higher education and attenuating the centralization of resources in the capital city that has historically characterized Mexican society (Kent, 1992).

But in 1983 a prolonged economic depression was unleashed by the government's inability to meet its debt obligations. For five years the economy was hit by negative growth rates, hyperinflation, capital flight and high unemployment. The government was totally absorbed with controlling the economic crisis, putting social policy on the back burner. In higher education, public funds were kept at a constant level, and inflation was permitted to diminish their real value; investments and research funds were halted; professor's salaries lost almost 40% of their real earnings, and many scientists left for greener pastures abroad. Total enrollment reached 1,200,000 by 1990 but the public sectors (universities and technological institutes) had stopped growing, whereas private institutions continued to expand.

Thus, improvised expansion, institutional differentiation, economic instability and political turbulence stand out in the experience of the 1970's and 1980's. The shifts in the structure and dynamics of the higher education system were more a result of social and economic forces than of rational design by policy makers. Actually, it is fair to say that, during this period, government played an active role in *funding* expansion but a passive one in *regulating* it. The fact that unregulated expansion followed the pressures of social and political demands rather than the goals

of academic excellence or technological development can be explained by the prevalence of a *system culture* heavily permeated with a social welfare ideology that defined public education as free and academically nonselective public service. Additional ingredients were nationalism and institutional autonomy, understood as absolute freedom of the university to determine its goals, programs and operations. As we shall see, in recent years this ideology seems to have lost its predominance.

Between 1989 and 1994, the Salinas administration built on the previous government's economic policy by radically reducing import tariffs, privatizing more than 1,000 public sector firms, bringing public finances under control, and deregulating agriculture and the export sector. In 1993, Mexico, Canada and the United States signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, and in April 1994 Mexico entered the OECD. These initiatives represented a radical shift away from the protected economy with ample state intervention that had prevailed in Mexico since the 1930's.

Economic recovery in the 1990's permitted the government to focus on social policy, and education became once more a priority. Spending for education grew significantly under new guidelines. The main priority was, of course, elementary and secondary education, where teachers' salaries were raised, the curriculum was reformed and the whole system was decentralized to the state governments. These were very significant reforms: they put education high on the national agenda, reversed ancient tendencies in the Mexican educational establishment, and gathered momentum for policy change in other sectors.

In higher education, the early 1990's brought important changes as well. The old tradition of granting block subsidies to public institutions based on individual political negotiations between Rectors and the federal government was partially displaced by new mechanisms. This time-honored and highly entrenched mode of allocation was not totally abandoned. But it was set for minimum growth, whereas new funds were spent on focussed grants, incentives for institutional reform, and investment in academic infrastructure. Other taboos were broken: differentiated salary scales and individual productivity grants were introduced for professors and researchers, going against long-established union pressure in favor of uniform pay scales. Additionally, public universities were induced to increase their own income from student fees and the sale of services. Entrance examinations were introduced in most public universities, and national competency tests are being developed for graduates of certain professions (law, dentistry, accounting, and engineering). An important ingredient of these reforms was the establishment of institutional evaluation and external peer review.

In the public technological institutes, funding was increased and teaching programs were reformed. There is a greater emphasis now on establishing relationships with local industry. As the new entrance examinations have reduced enrollment in public universities, student numbers are growing in the technological institutes and in the newly created two-year vocational institutions, called Technological Universities. For a country with a strong *statist* tradition which has fiercely defended the separation of public higher education from business, it is culturally

significant that the governance structures of these new institutions were designed to include people from local industry.

Under a reformed National Council for Science and Technology, research and postgraduate studies were heavily supported, following a policy of peer review for research projects and a performance indicator system for postgraduate programs. Financial incentives for technological development with industry increased significantly. Although the effort to link engineering departments and research centers to local industry is a budding trend, it is not yet clear whether significant research and development initiatives are emerging or whether most of these efforts basically entail consultancies and instructional services. This very recent tendency in Mexican higher education seems to be taking root especially in the more active and academically well established universities and technological institutes, but it is by no means a craze that has gripped the entire system.

One additional trend should be mentioned: institutional restructuring. At least four public universities, including the second and fourth largest ones<sup>1</sup>, have implemented significant structural transformations. The largest university outside Mexico City was radically decentralized and reorganized as a regional system of higher education with various smaller associate campuses. Others have effected important curriculum reforms, abandoning the traditional *faculté* structure for departments and strengthening basic requirements in foreign languages, mathematics and the use of computers. New management and information systems have been set up in some universities, giving Rectors and their staff a growing (and sometimes more centralized) role in the way the institution is handled. An important aspect of these reforms is the search for new sources of funds to complement the government subsidies, basically through increased student fees and the sale of services.

### **Some Central Policy Dilemmas:**

The system as a whole has recovered funding levels of the early eighties, the *idea* of evaluation was introduced (although not totally consummated), and several traditional taboos were broken down. This partial shift in attitudes and *system culture* was surely lubricated by fresh funds, but it is not clear whether this is a move toward quality betterment or a new set of bureaucratic games that universities have adapted to without developing new practices internally. The main pieces of an evaluation system are in place: external peer review committees, institutional self-evaluation and individual productivity assessment for academics. But their operating logic is unclear and their implementation has been uneven, to say the least.

This is probably the result of the way the system of higher education had developed in Mexico. In a period of two decades, higher education went through an intense and abrupt process of differentiation, giving rise to growing system heterogeneity, which is characteristic of the way cultural change has occurred in Latin America. Thus, one finds a great variety of institutions coexisting in an unclear operating framework: old and new establishments, universities and non-university institutions, public and private, catholic and secular, elite and massive, single mission

and demand-absorbing institutions, research-oriented and teaching establishments. All this has occurred in a disorderly fashion, in the absence of coherent forms of regulation (Brunner, 1990). Therefore, it should not be expected that the implementation of an evaluation system -- whose logic departs radically from the traditional *modus operandi* of Mexican higher education -- could be carried out in a uniform and orderly manner. Some institutions have embraced the new rules with genuine and intelligent effort. Others have played the simulation game. And yet others have sidestepped evaluation altogether.

The same is true of institutional restructuring. A few public universities have made important efforts to reorganize themselves. But a sceptic would ask: what is being done about restructuring the National University of Mexico, one of the largest higher education institutions in the world with more than 120,000 undergraduate students? The answer is: nothing. Similarly, the smaller institutions in the poorer regions of Mexico seem fixed in their ways. Once again, these processes of change are occurring unevenly.

A pessimist would say, "The whole effort is becoming distorted". I prefer to look at this as a complex learning process that will surely take time. But it will also require greater clarity of aims and procedures on the part of policy makers and the development of new stakeholders in the higher education system. The following issues will probably have to be examined more closely<sup>2</sup>:

- o *Is there clarity of purpose?* The establishment of a coherent and long-term agenda has not been a notable trait of public policy in Mexico. It would certainly seem that policies such as evaluation need time to settle in a system which has historically been averse to the very idea of someone from "the outside" intruding on the basic tasks of teachers and researchers. However, one must ask: will time be enough if funding is not focussed, purposes are unclear, and outcomes are not measured and publicly disclosed?
- o *Is this a strategy for improvement or accountability?* Certainly the former has predominated over the latter. Each institution has been left to develop its own strategy and is not being asked to show results to the public at large. However, I would suggest that a slightly greater measure of accountability would be an improvement in itself, considering the fact that Mexican institutions of higher education have a long inward-looking tradition.
- o *To what extent does the institutional capacity exist to implement new reforms?* Up to now, the policy reforms have been carried out by the federal government. Since the primary and secondary levels were decentralized to the states in 1992 and there is currently a strong commitment by the new government to decentralize the fiscal system as well, it is possible that in the near future state governments will take charge of higher education as well. It is clear that government as such has adopted a much more active role than in the past. How will local government develop a policy capability when it is asked to manage higher education as well? At the local level, actual government practice and administrative culture have still a lot to learn about efficient and responsible management.

- o *Are strong funding mechanisms preferable to weak ones?* Incentives for higher education (not so for science and postgraduate studies) have been indirect and vague and have not been based on results. Theoretically, the government is following new rules in funding that apparently represent a departure from traditional practice. But it is not clear to what extent this is really so. It is probably the case that institutions obtain new funds *when they say they adopt the government's programs*. This inducement strategy is producing uneven results and it might be reconsidered in view of the current financial crisis, leading perhaps to more focussed incentives based on public information on outcomes.
- o *Is the line between public and private funding becoming blurred?* Most certainly, public institutions will have to continue their efforts to diversify sources of funding, through student fees, the sale of services to the community and private donations. At the same time, private institutions are lobbying for additional public funds. The public institutions are becoming more private and the private ones want to drink at the government trough.
- o *Accreditation of private institutions* is likely to become an issue. Under current law, accreditation is extremely lax and allows any kind of private institution to exist, with almost perfunctory regard for their levels of quality, infrastructure or academic programs. In this context, private institutions have proliferated enormously over the past years, numbering more than 250 today. Some are well-endowed universities with serious academic missions; others are specialized training institutes in specific fields; but a great number are diploma mills of very low quality. We may be moving toward a more closely regulated market in the private sector.
- o *Internationalization of higher education policy.* Policy discussion among government officials, scientists and businessmen has opened up to the international currents of opinion, especially as Mexico has entered the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Asia Pacific Economic Council. There have been two trilateral educational meetings among Canadian, Mexican and US authorities, and discussions are under way to explore professional accreditation mechanisms and credit transfer among the the three countries. The Mexican Association for International Education was created in 1993 and has been active in promoting contacts among higher education institutions on both sides of the US/Mexico border.

### **Concluding remarks: the ambiguities of modernization**

The structure and dynamics of Mexican higher education have gone through significant shifts over the past generation. Enrollment expansion, institutional differentiation, and turbulence in the economic and political spheres have transformed the identities of old institutions and the traditional hierarchies within higher education. A system which traditionally considered itself to be basically *public* now finds that leaders in business and politics prefer private universities in Mexico and the United States. The cherished notion of university autonomy, always closely associated with political opposition by the left and radical corporate separation from society, now must reconcile itself with a demand for greater responsiveness to local economic needs. Whereas



public higher education was previously thought to mean free education and non-selective entry for secondary school leavers, now public institutions are charging fees and applying entrance examinations.

Higher education is caught up in currents of change that originate, not from within public institutions, but elsewhere: in government policy, in changing public perceptions, in the scientific community and in the changing educational marketplace. Both government and business have expressed expectations in the supposed contributions of higher education to modernization. There is currently a sense of urgency in the public's attitudes toward higher education that has contributed to legitimize recent government policies.

Until the early 1980's, this set of policies would have encountered almost insuperable opposition by public universities. But their tarnished public image and their internal infirmity allowed the government to move forward rapidly in establishing policies that have represented a significant shift from the old political accommodations. Led on by financial inducements, universities are groping to establish new rules in management, planning and funding.

The fact that in the past fifteen years several million people have attended a higher education institution is an important ingredient in the rapidly changing bases of citizenship, political participation, gender relationships and cultural consumption in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> The growth of higher education has produced a generation of Mexicans who are enormously more literate, politically active, culturally demanding and probably more sceptical than their parents. They also express demands of increasing diversity on the quality standards that the educational system offers their own children. Politics is becoming more democratic and the economy has opened up to the world market.

But there are serious structural problems facing Mexican society. The economy is not creating enough jobs for the million people who reach the age of eighteen every year, of whom about 15% are enrolled in higher education. The widespread reforms in macroeconomic policy carried out since the mid-1980's have not kept their promise of building a healthy economy. Mexico received a massive inflow of foreign money (a mixed blessing, we have recently learned to our regret), inflation was brought under control, unprecedented growth was achieved in foreign trade, and the public sector was privatized. But there is a dark side to these reforms: low real growth rates in per capita terms, inability to raise productivity significantly, persistent income disparities and ineffectual public institutions. Little attention was paid to structural problems. The *rules* were changed but not the *organizations*: "eliminating subsidies to inefficient public firms is easily done with the stroke of a pen, but organizing a well-targeted social program to compensate the poor for the loss of subsidies requires complex organizational efforts that take much longer to bear fruit" (Naim, 1995). Now we need to reconcile macroeconomic stability and an open economy with big reductions in poverty.

The enormous expansion of higher education was sufficient to extend coverage for the middle and partly the lower middle strata, but growth reached the limits imposed by severe social selection at

the primary school level where about 30% of the children enrolled drop out before reaching sixth grade. Of the country's ninety five million inhabitants, thirty five million live in poverty and six million adults are illiterate. The modernized industrial areas in the center and North are increasingly integrated into the North American economy. But the poor South is based on subsistence agriculture with an indigenous underclass that is now making a dramatic appeal to repair its historical exclusion from economic development and cultural integration.

In this context, what is the definition of a *good education*? Educational values among students, academics, policymakers and political groups are in transition. Social identities have become more fragmented and new means of digesting cultural change are emerging with difficulty. I might simplistically make a caricature of the extremes of three different stances that stand out in current debates:

- Neoconservative nostalgia for the orderly transmission of cultural tradition.
- Uncritical adoption of a modernistic educational discourse sometimes linked to technological messianism.
- Currents of resistance that express fear of the destruction of historically ingrained popular forms of sociability by intense modernization.

Higher education institutions are enveloped by tensions among various cultural forms which need to find a means to express and resolve themselves. The dispute over educational values will surely continue, as educators are faced with the double goal of providing a good basic education for everyone and simultaneously developing a sophisticated system of higher education that is needed to support international economic competitiveness and cultural integration. This is surely a heavy diet for anybody, and educational leaders in government and institutions are faced with multiple and contradictory demands. Do they understand them? Can they mobilize intellectual and financial resources to provide responses? I have the uncomfortable impression that in only a few cases can the answer to these questions be "yes".

Mexico and other Latin American countries are trying to move away from inefficient and fragmented semi-authoritarianism: systems that are *centralized* (and sometimes autocratic) but *not disciplined*; governments that are *elaborately organized but institutionally weak*, where structures are complex but officials adhere to personalistic norms of behavior.<sup>4</sup> The economic reforms and the widespread push for more democratic government in most Latin American countries over the past decade have begun to surpass these structures. However, more definite steps toward deeper and more lasting institutional reform are yet to be taken in many sectors in order to anchor the reforms in technical competence and effectiveness, accountability and stakeholder development. One of them is certainly higher education.

### Notes

1. The state universities of Guadalajara and Puebla.
2. The following observations are taken from Ewell & Kent, 1995.
3. The following comments are based on Kent (forthcoming).
4. These observations are taken from a analysis of government in China today by Lucian Pye, in "Life After Deng", a review of *Governing China: From Revolution to Reform*, by Kenneth Lieberthal, *New York Times Book Review*, april 9, 1995, p. 27. Pye's remarks are quite pertinent to the Mexican situation.

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