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Goals That Melt Away. Higher Education Provision in Mexico

Abstract

The paper describes the growth of Mexican higher education in relation to political economy of the country from the decade of the fifties until present time. The historical analysis looks the moments in which major changes have been introduced to produce important effects in enrollments. The aim of this paper is to show how the provision of higher education opportunities is related to the fate of a development model followed by the country and how, when losing control of economy, its national goals escape between the fingers.

Keywords: higher education, growth of opportunities, Mexico

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show how the provision of higher education opportunities is related to the fate of a development model followed by the country and how, when losing control of economy, its national goals escape between the fingers. The paper describes the growth of Mexican higher education in relation to political economy of the country from the decade of the fifties until present time. The historical analysis looks the moments in which major changes have been introduced to produce important effects in enrollments. We look to the impact that growth in basic education during the sixties had in higher education fifteen years later. The financial crisis of the eighties that brought a des-acceleration of enrolments growth but there were no funds to cover deficits in infrastructure in the context of new demands. This growth with no financial support provoked doubts about the quality of higher education services and private institutions mushroomed.

With the arrival of a new century, there was a change of the ruling party and the new regime created more than one hundred universities. With the goal of raising the participation rate from 26 to a 40%, with this a new political goal has been posed; the government very recently declared the pre-university level as compulsory and there are some effects that can be foreseen for the years to come in relation to access to higher education.

The neoliberal arena

Until the middle of the decade of the fifties, the Mexican economy had grown at an annual rate of 6%. This allowed for growth in infrastructure for the industrial sector and for saving some internal revenues to have an increase in employment and in real salaries. At that time, this growth, plus the finding of new oil deposits, made of Mexico a good recipient for external loans in such a way that the payment of debt's service consumed up to a 13% of incomes from goods and services export. But for 1982, a suspension of new loans brought about a lack of confidence and with this, a period of monetary depreciation and instability started (Urquidi, 1996). During 1983, a structural adjustment was initiated with a negative impact on the

employment figures and the value of salaries. Social gaps were widening with an effect of the already existing polarization of society. In 1985, Mexico enters to the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT).

The period from mid-seventies to mid-eighties was crucial. A big amount of financial capital flew away, there was a devaluation of Mexican currency, an international decrease in oil prices, a growth of the external and the internal debt; but in contradiction to neoliberal thinking, the presidential period of De la Madrid ended up with the nationalization of the banking system. From a neo-liberal perspective this decision was paradoxical, although during the next governmental regime it was “amended”; but it is important to notice it since, in a way, it symbolizes the kind of contradictions that will characterize the implementing of neoliberal policies in Mexico.

Even when the initiative for economic restructuring obeyed to the obsolescence of the Mexican model of “stabilizing development”, the neo-liberal agenda was on its way: a reduction of state intervention in economy, privatization of public enterprises, decentralization of authority, deregulation and downsizing of bureaucracy, marginalization of labor unions, minimization of subsidies and protection to population (health and education) and the devise of welfare programs for the poverty generated by this same agenda (Latapí, 2008).

The next federal regimes were much aligned to this agenda using a discourse of modernization in support of structural adjustment, implementing mechanisms and agreements with different interest and pressure groups to control inflation, to control growth in salaries, to have a more efficient and clear use of public finance, so as to reduce public spending in social services.

During the regime of Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) policies were more clearly defined to promote “modernization”. During his administration, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was arranged with the intention to articulate the economies of Mexico, United States and Canada; and the admission of Mexico to the Organization for the Cooperation and Economic Development (OCDE) was completed.

For that time, the inequalities and levels of poverty were unbearable. The first day of the year of 1994 represents, symbolically, the beginning of a new stage of the tensions and contradictions of neoliberal economic and social policies. That date was stipulated as the beginning of operations of North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and during the first minutes of the day, when members of the cabinet were still celebrating new year’s eve, the President was informed that the Zapatista Army of National Liberation had declared war to Mexican government and its neoliberal policy. Sub commandant Marcos had initiated an armed attack to military forces located in the mountains of the state of Chiapas. All over the country, the diverse manifestations of the conflict polarized opinions and political expressions and mobilizations, either in favor or against the Zapatista Army. Years later, in 1999, the students at the national university stood for a long period of strike against a move to raise students’ fees.

Social movements, as the above mentioned examples, to resist neoliberal policies, have refrained governments from introducing abrupt changes “from above”. Instead, cautiously the actions taken have been different for every sector. In the case of the higher education, different organisms and instruments have been set up to mediate relationships between universities and government. As it will be

reviewed in the next sections, incremental higher education policies have been operated, with no significant changes in contents, even with the shift of the political ruling party at the federal level, over the change of the century (Navarro Leal, 2009).

Growth of higher education system

In Mexico, most of the higher education institutions were created during the second half of the last century. But since the decade of the seventies, this education level initiated a process of accelerated expansion. During that decade the number of higher education institutions grew from 80 to 260 and undergraduate enrolments grew up from 80 thousand to a more than a million students. The participation rate of the age group went up from 2.7% to 13.1%, while the number of faculties went from 10 thousand to 80 thousand (Casillas, 1993).

For the next decade, the eighties, the rate of expansion went down, given that the governmental expenditure in education was reduced in more than 30%. The proportion of federal expenditure in the education sector went down from 21% to 16%, and one of the most affected lines was the salaries (Kent, 1996). As Lopez (1996) pointed out, faculties and researchers initiated an exodus towards different economic activities with better wages.

These financial cuts made hard to continue with building of classrooms, acquisition of equipment and labs, hiring more faculties. The problem generated by the fiscal deficit acquired a mayor dimension from the perspective of quality demands to universities in the new competitive scenario of globalization. Financial restrictions put pressure in public universities to look for different sources of revenues, among others: existing student fees were raised and some other fees were created for the use of labs and gyms; many of the graduate programs started functioning on student fees, and still are. Just like in the private institutions.

Nevertheless, expansion did not stop. In 2006, there were 1892 higher education institutions, 713 were public institutions, and 1179 were private. In the school year 2004-2005, a total of 2,538, 256 students were enrolled; 1,707,434 (67.3%) in public institutions and 830,822 (32.7%) in private institutions.

For the school year 2010-2011, enrolments of higher education were above three million of students, from which about 9% were attended through distance education programs (Tuirán, 2011). About one third of undergraduate enrolments were in private institutions, as well as 40% of graduate students. It is important to mention that during the last governmental period the public sector was accelerated, going from an enrolment of 2.5 million in 2006 to 3.1 million in 2012. A 70% of this growth was due by means of the creation of 92 new institutions, such as technological institutes, technological universities, and polytechnic universities, as well as new campuses or existing state universities (Rodríguez Gómez & Ordorika, 2012).

For the purpose of this paper, the figures presented give an idea of the dimension of the growth that Mexican higher education has had during the last decades, but in spite of this growth, and contrary to what has been happening in another sectors, where neoliberal policies impinged deeper (like in communications, for instance) the private sector of higher education has kept the same proportion of about a third of the enrolments, proportion that is different from other countries, like Brazil, where the private sector has grown to become larger than the public, at least to what student enrolments is concerned.

But the above figures also show that Mexican public higher education went through a difficult situation during the decade of the eighties, an enormous expansion with a lack of enough financial support submerge it into a crisis of quality and, what is of most importance, a crisis of confidence on these kind of institutions. In some newspapers from those years, one could read in some job advertisements, phrases like "... graduates from public universities please refrain from applying". This crisis produced serious effects with consequences through the years, up until now.

At the end of the decade of the eighties, an extended public opinion was that private institution managed to offer a better education than public universities. Quality of public higher education was at stake as a result of the fiscal crisis. How was it possible that an enormous university sector, being so poor, could cope with new demands of the economy? The interpretation of the problem was ambiguous: was it only a problem of lack of financial resources? Was it a problem of disparities with labor market? Was it a problem of inequities in distribution of education opportunities? Was it a problem of marketing?

The explanation of the problem of quality in higher education was linked to the effects of an accelerated growth without an adequate financial support. For instance, an evaluation practiced at the end of the eighties decade, by a team from the International Council for Educational Development, led by Philip Coombs, explained that the problem of quality of Mexican higher education was related to the enormous expansion of enrolments and the wide differentiation of institutions and programs on a setting of financial constraints (International Council for Educational Development, 1990); and some years later, in a different evaluation done by the OECD, it was added that the rapid expansion brought about severe inequalities of educational services among regions and social groups, as well as disparities in the distribution of students among professional fields and between the number of graduates and the capacity of absorption of labor markets (OCDE, 1997).

These concerns brought about a new kind of relationship between the central government and the public institutions. After a long period of loose control upon universities, new kinds of arrangements were set up for their conduction and coordination. As in another spheres of public life, instead of diminishing state intervention, the federal government posed a new set of instruments to implement higher education policies. These new set of arrangements have been identified by some authors as "neo interventionism" (Acosta, 2002).

In November 1989, the General Assembly of the National Association of Universities (ANUIES), approved the creation of the National Commission for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CONAEVA) to design and articulate a national process of evaluation and to propose quality criteria and standards to assess the functions and activities, as well as to devise an alternative model to assign financial resources to universities in correspondence to results of evaluation (CONAEVA, 1990).

During the next years, the CONAEVA worked on different areas for evaluation: institutional development, educational programs, faculty activity and students learning. Every one of these lines of evaluation followed different paths and have been analyzed (Navarro, 2013) in relation to their effectiveness as a means to assign extraordinary funds to support institutional development.

Concluding remarks: goals that melt away

At the beginning of the second development of the new century, being the country well advanced in the adoption of the neoliberal model through the so called structural adjustment, with a correspondent wave of reforms, a conflict in Middle East produces a radical drop in Mexican oil prices, with a radical reduction of the currency exchange rate, followed by an important reduction of financial remittances from Mexicans working in United States. A new fiscal crisis is in its way. The government has no longer financial resources to cope neither with growth of pre-university and university level of education, as to reach the goal of 40% in youth participation of higher education opportunities, nor promoting quality of existing higher education provision.

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