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Higher education in Ecuador: A reflective analysis

Crystal Edenfield

Abstract

Over the last decade, many changes have taken place in Ecuador regarding education, specifically higher education. A new president was elected in 2006 and as a result a new constitution was approved in 2008. This new constitution offered educational opportunities to all Ecuadorians. The purpose of this paper is to analyze higher education in Ecuador. It will discuss and react to Ecuador's demographics as well as the highlights of the country's higher education system. It will conclude with considering the implications.

Introduction

Ecuador is a country located in western South America. Bordering the Pacific Ocean, Ecuador is situated between Columbia and Peru. In 2014, it was estimated that Ecuador had a population of 15,654,411 people. Quito is the capital of Ecuador. The official language of Ecuador is Spanish. Ecuador's primary religion is Roman Catholic. It is estimated that 2 to 3 million Ecuadorians live abroad in the United States, Spain, and Italy. There is a high level of poverty in the rural areas of Ecuador. In addition, there is a high risk for infectious disease. The President of Ecuador is Rafael Correa. Elected in 2006 and sworn into office in 2007, the new president was an advocate for social change. Correa's leadership has brought many changes to education in Ecuador (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015).

Education

In Ecuador, all children are required to receive a basic level of education. This typically means that a child will attend school for nine years. Primary, secondary, and post-secondary education is free for all Ecuadorians. According to Williams, if a student goes to and completes secondary school they will receive a diploma (2009, 40). Ecuador has over 4,000 academic programs (Hardt, 2014). Students chose a specialty before they begin college and do not change their specialty while there. Over 620,000 students attend college in Ecuador (Hardt, 2014).

Major Universities. Although there are over 70 higher education institutions, there are three major universities in Ecuador. The National Polytechnic School (NPS) is located in Quito. It is a public university and is known for research and education in applied science, astronomy, atmospheric physics, engineering, and physical sciences. Another major university is Central University of Ecuador (CUE). This national university is located in Quito. It was established in 1826, making CUE the oldest university in Ecuador. They maintain an annual enrollment of over 10,000 students. The other major university in Ecuador is Universidad San Francisco de Quito. The main campus is located outside of Quito in Cumbaya. It is the only university in the world that owns a campus in the Galapagos Islands and a campus in the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve.

Higher Education Reform

Over the last 7 years, higher education in Ecuador has gone through major reform. There have been two developments that have contributed to the reform: the approval of a new Constitution and the adoption of the Higher Education Law.

A New Constitution

The first development took place in 2008 when voters approved a new constitution. This new constitution granted every Ecuadorian citizen with free public education at all levels (Van Hoof, Estrella, Eljuri, & Leon, 2013). According to Van Hoof et al. the constitution “changed land-tenancy rights, natural resource management, and addressed various other economic, social, and environmental issues” and also “established people’s rights to education, food and water, and health and social security” (2013, 4). The new constitution allowed implementation of quick social change in order to alleviate poverty and increase other social programs in what President called 21st century socialism. Its goal was to provide academic and professional training, scientific research and technological innovation, the development and dissemination of knowledge, and the generation of solutions to the country’s social and economic problems (Van Hoof, et al., 2013). Ecuador implemented entrance exam for high school students. Exam sees if students were prepared for university and tells what discipline students will study. Some educators believe that the new reform has restricted public university students’ freedom to choose and that the government wants to force the students to study something according to what the government needs (Haney, 2014).

A New Law

The second development occurred in 2010 when Ecuador adopted the Higher Education Law. Historically, Ecuador’s higher education system focused on students receiving a degree not necessarily their ability to do so. In the past, every high school student was able to attend university if he or she wanted to, regardless of academic accomplishment (Riley, 2014). This law increased the regulation of the country’s universities aligning the research and education efforts with social and economic development needs (Van Hoof et al., 2013). The law focused on assessment, accreditation, and quality assurance as efforts to improve education (Hardt, 2014).

A New Accreditation Agency

In 2010 as a part of the Higher Education Law, the government founded a new accrediting agency called CEAASES (Consejo de Evaluacion Acreditacion y aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educacion Superior). This new accrediting process raised the bar for quality of academic programs at institutions like never before. It also eliminated those institutions that did not make the grade. Institutions were ranked on a scale from A to E rating infrastructural and classroom supplies, academic rigor, school budget, and research (Hardt, 2014; Haney, 2014; Riley, 2014). For the first time in 2012, CEAASES and government closed 14 universities because they did not meet the new academic standards. The goal is to have a more

knowledgeable public that is more aware of international events and wants to get to know more things (Haney, 2014).

Critical Reaction

It is my opinion that Ecuador has taken great steps in improving access to their higher education institutions. It is very clear that the government has invested in helping the public understand the importance of an educated society. Perhaps the government tried to change too many things at once and should have gradually introduced some of this reform to its citizens. There has been a push for vocational training. This push makes some faculty members skeptical. According to one educator, the only reason there have been changes at the institutions is because the government is a dictatorship and if you protest you go to jail. Therefore, teachers have improved the quality of teaching but only because they are afraid and being forced to (Haney, 2014).

I am surprised that although education is free for all, there is still a gap in those being educated. The intention is that accreditation will improve schools and the quality of education. Eliminating the costs was supposed to open access. There have been some complaints that all costs have not been eliminated. There are still institutional fees and transportation costs that students have to cover. So the wealthy succeed because they have been well prepared at the elementary and secondary levels. They have the resources to invest and the time to devote to studying. The average citizen only finishes the required years of schooling before pausing their education and returning home to help take care of younger siblings, other family members, or the family business (Haney, 2014).

I expected the people and educators to not completely buy into the process. Sometimes it takes years to really trust the efforts. And after having eight presidents in 10 years, I can only imagine the skepticism with such major changes. Even in the last few days protests against the Ecuadorian government have occurred. Protests have grown from being organized by social media to being led by political opponents, trade unions, indigenous people, and social activists (Alvaro, 2015). There is a desire to have an Ecuador where all freedoms are respected, especially freedom of expression and to be able to progress (Alvaro, 2015).

Implications

Higher education reform was supposed to bring access but there are still costs that students are having to pay. The recent protests communicate a desire for freedom. Some Ecuadorians feel as if the educational reform has taken away freedom to choose their academic program and career path. Others feel that it is broadening the gap between the poor and the wealthy. It makes sense that the government places a greater emphasis on vocational training instead of a liberal education so they can keep these individuals in their home country to work. Especially since millions of Ecuadorians leave each year to find work in other countries. It is my opinion that Ecuador tried to change too many things at once and is facing an uphill battle. I feel the major implication of the higher education reform in Ecuador is that the government tried to accomplish too many things at once. In the end, the reform could undo all that it was supposed to do.

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