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## **NEW DIRECTIONS AT MEXICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

### **Problems and Actions**

Public higher education in Mexico is in deep transformation since some decades ago, but the collision between traditional academic organization and the pressures of modernization and globalization became evident at the turn of the century, when two researches asked if there were "*Continuity or new directions in Mexican higher education?*" (Kent and De Vries 1997). The Mexican university system in particular is no more an elitist one, but it is neither an institution with a thorough satisfactory achievement of its principal goals at a time when the country is facing the challenge of knowledge society. The documents of educational planning insist on the excessive heterogeneity of this system. Changes produced a hybrid structure, combining features from a period of expansion with those from a period marked by the restrictions in economical and social policies since the nineties of the last century, and by the rise in competition at different economical and political levels, both nationally and internationally (Varela Petito 1996 and 2010). At the same time, the aim to integrate Mexico to the knowledge society demands a massive increase in the educational standards. This is reflected on the governmental policies meant as incentives for higher education, because the improvement in life and work opportunities, driven by productivity rather than by the low cost of labor, require also an effective increase in the education rates of the population. But the answer to this challenge could not come only from above

(i.e., government requirements) but instead, from changing at the impulse of the universities themselves.

During 1970-2010, the development of higher education placed particular emphasis on enrollment and teaching in one hand; in the other hand, scientific research proven by different mechanisms of evaluation and dissemination (publications, patents, etc.) was less developed in higher education institutions (HEIs). Besides, linking HEIs-Society, like so many other policy initiatives as planning, evaluation or academic excellence, emerged as a political slogan not so far implemented (Cimoli 2000). There is an ambiguous performance at this point, because the balance is different if the emphasis is put on official statements and written agreements, than if it is observed by bonding experiences actually running, meaning the achievement of a productive and virtuous linking between academic, public, private and social sectors, where it has not been enough progress -in spite of a relative improvement in the participation of private initiative in technological innovation, in response to fiscal stimuli.

In the "home front" of HEIs, since the late 1980s, the academic career in public higher education institutions has been associated with individual evaluation programs that fixes payments in addition to wages, a practice which has drawn criticism (Tapia Quiroz and Varela Petit 2014). The said policy seeks to institutionalize meritocratic procedures by linking ideal "profiles" with productivity-based points systems which are used to establish differential monetary rewards. Parameters and indicators are used to measure the performance of an academic's main activities (research, teaching and dissemination). But its effect is not limited to a greater pay differentiation or the establishment of a productivity-based compensation system. Given that social actors are involved, it determines deeper changes, with repercussions on professional self-perception, which is affected by two aspects: the behaviorist orientation of such a policy, and the internalization of new values. Behaviorism implies that behavior is guided by the stimulus-response relationship; the internalization of values derives from the results that routine evaluations would produce in academic life. Additionally, evaluation linked to

academic professionalization not only means a rethinking of the strategies used for the determination, assignment and use of financial resources, but is also a way of planning higher education that aspires to a level of rationalization greater than in years prior to 1990. It responds to a tendency to seek better governance of universities, management capacity, academic and administrative reorganization, planning and evaluation (World Bank 1994).

### **Trends and Policy**

In brief, as a result of forty years planning melted with spontaneous reactions, there are some highlights to remark:

-AN INCREASING GROWTH OF STUDENT ENROLMENT IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM (HEIs) BUT PARTICULARLY IN PUBLIC OR PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES. THE PUBLIC IS RELUCTANT TO ENROLMENT IN TECHNOLOGICAL EDUCATION.

-STUDENTS IN THE HEIs REACH ABOUT 30% (c. 3,000.000) OF THE AGE GROUP 19 TO 23 YEARS OLD (ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL DATA SUBJECT TO DISCUSSION). MEXICAN GOVERNMENT IS PROPOSING TO REACH AT LEAST 40% ON 2018.

-ABOUT TWO THIRDS OF STUDENTS IN THE HEIs ARE ENROLED IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIs) AND ABOUT 40% IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES.

-THERE IS A RATHER SCARCE DEVELOPMENT OF TECHNOLOGICAL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS.

-AS IN OTHER LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES, PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION HAD A REMARKABLE GROWTH IN RECENT DECADES, OUT OF FINANCIAL OR (DURING THE 1970's) POLITICAL PROBLEMS IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES, BUT ALSO AS A RESULT OF AN IMPLICIT GOVERNMENTAL POLICY.

-AT LEAST BETWEEN 9% AND 10% OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS ABANDON STUDIES WITHOUT FINISHING THEM –MOST OF THEM DURING THEIR FIRST ACADEMIC PERIOD.

-SOME PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES AND TECHNOLOGICAL INSTITUTES USE TO DO THE MOST PART OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN MEXICO; OTHER IMPORTANT PART (REGARDING OIL OR HEALTH) IS DONE BY OTHER PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS. NOTWITHSTANDING FISCAL STIMULA PRIVATE ENTERPRISES USE NOT TO DO MUCH R&D AND ARE MAINLY DEPENDENT ON FOREIGN TECHNOLOGY.

-PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES ARE AUTONOMOUS BY THE FEDERAL CONSTITUTION. NEVERTHELESS THE AUTHORITY OF THE GOVERNMENT BY MEANS OF NEW WAYS OF FUNDING BASED ON INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT BECAME INCREASINGLY PRESSING SINCE THE 1990's.

-TWO MAIN OBJECTIVES OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY ARE: 1) SOCIAL EQUITY IN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION; 2) EDUCATIONAL CATCH-UP WITH OTHER MEMBERS OF THE NORTH AMERICA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT (U.S. AND CANADA).

-SOME OFFICIAL CRITICAL IDEAS ABOUT THE PUBLIC HEIs WERE (ANUIES 2000) AND STILL ARE:

1. INSUFFICIENT QUALITY OF TEACHING
2. SCARCE EQUIPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE
3. SCARCE DEVELOPMENT OF R&D
4. REGIONAL HETEROIGENEITY
5. PRESSURE GROUPS INSIDE PUBLIC HEIS DIFFICULTING BETTER MANAGEMENT
6. MORE STUDENTS ENROLED IN THE HEIs DOES NOT MEAN *PER SE* BETTER QUALITY OF EDUCATION
7. MUCH STUDENTS DO NOT FINISH THEIR CAREERS
8. UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDING (AND OTHER RESOURCES) BETWEEN HEIS

9. LOCAL (STATES) GOVERNMENTS DO NOT INVOLVE THEMSELVES VERY MUCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION ADVANCE

10. SCARCE INVOLVEMENT OF HEIS IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

-MAIN GOALS OF PUBLIC POLICY REGARDING MEXICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM:

1. MORE ENROLMENT WITH SOCIAL EQUITY
2. IMPROVE QUALITY
3. BETTER MANAGEMENT AND PARTICULARLY, BETTER COORDINATION OF THE HEIS AS A WHOLE

-SOME PROPOSALS:

1. FOSTER COLLECTIVE LABOUR OF TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS
2. GIVE AN IMPULSE TO COORDINATION BETWEEN HEIS
3. ENCOURAGE TEACHERS TO GET PHD DEGREES
4. **MOST OF ALL: FOSTER THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION EVALUATION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL, TO ASSESS QUALITY**

### **Conclusion**

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVALUATION LINKED TO THE PROMISE OF INCREASING FUNDING TO PUBLIC HEIS, IS THE PRINCIPAL TOOL OF OFFICIAL EDUCATIONAL POLICY REGARDING THE HEIS. BUT THE ANSWER TO THIS AND OTHER CHALLENGES COULD NOT COME ONLY FROM ABOVE BUT INSTEAD FROM NEW DIRECTIONS FROM UNIVERSITIES THEMSELVES.**

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