

Concern of central government and regions now turns to quality assurance and finances

Democracy, Decentralization Arrive on Campus

Heads of state from Latin America, Spain and Portugal gather at the October 2005 Ibero-American Summit at the University of Salamanca, founded in 1218 by King Alfonso IX of Leon.



REUTERS/MARCELO DEL POZO

BY FRANCISCO MICHAVILA AND JORGE MARTÍNEZ

THE CURRENT ORGANIZATION OF THE SPANISH STATE IS based on the Constitution of 1978 that established the country as a parliamentary monarchy. Its territory is politically and administratively divided into municipalities, provinces and Autonomous Communities. The latter are the equivalent of states or provinces in a federal system.

Democracy returned to Spain with the first democratic elections after General Francisco Franco's dictatorship. In 1977, a Parliament was elected, 41 years after the last elections. With this election began the period known as the Transition, the highlight of which was the writing of a new Constitution, passed in 1978. That was the starting point for the current democratic period. This Constitution permitted the creation of Autonomous Communities as well as the devolution and decentralization of certain areas of government, while others remain under the federal (known in Spain as the State or central) government. In the case of higher education, the transfer of responsibilities took place between 1985 and 1996.

The Spanish university system is made up of 73 institutions, of which 50 are public, 16 are private, and seven are run by the Catholic Church. A smaller sector in post-secondary education includes professional and technical schools as well as arts, language and sports institutions. Ninety per cent of undergraduate students and 95 per cent of those doing doctoral studies enrol in public institutions,

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mostly universities, which also play a major role in the field of research as they employ 40 per cent of all researchers in the country. A smaller sector in post-secondary education includes professional and technical schools as well as arts, language and sports institutions.

University Autonomy vs. Madrid

Spain's 1978 Constitution established academic freedom and university autonomy, which are deeply rooted within the country's tradition despite the 40-year Franco dictatorship – or perhaps because of it. University autonomy covers academic, financial and management matters.

Since 1983, when the Law for University Reform was passed, Spanish universities have undergone very important changes affecting their governance, as well as their coordination and organization as part of a post-secondary system. Further reforms were undertaken in 2001 and 2007, which changed the functions and jurisdictions of the main actors in university politics, while maintaining the importance of the triad of central government, Autonomous Communities and universities.

The central government, through its Ministry of Education and Science, is responsible for formulating general guidelines for university policy. The ministry plays several key roles, including: setting university entry requirements; developing and managing the system for awarding scholarships and grants; designing and managing innovation and quality policy; and the validation of degrees. Two public universities also fall directly under central government jurisdiction.

The Autonomous Communities' jurisdiction covers the following functions:

- administration and regulation of the university system within their territories;

SPECIAL SECTION

Post-Secondary Education



- programming the financing and services of universities within their systems;
- complementing the central government scholarship and grant system if they so choose;
- deciding whether to create or abolish universities within their territory; and
- exercising administrative jurisdiction over the universities in their territory.

Move Toward Democratization

The General Conference on University Policy was created for the coordination, agreement and cooperation of the different parties within the system with regard to general higher education policy.

The universities' internal administration is regulated by a legal framework that sets out basic minimum structures and that distinguishes between collegiate and individual bodies.

Starting with the law of 1983, attempts were made to modernize university administration, open it up to society and democratize it. The downside has been that the new model decreases the flexibility and agility of university decision-making.

The quality assurance system has a national agency at its core in charge of evaluation, certification and accreditation, the National Agency for Quality Evaluation and Accreditation (ANECA). There are eight regional agencies that work alongside ANECA, each of which has some activities in common, including assessment.

Creation of the European Higher Education Area and the subsequent reform of the Spanish university system have delayed implementation of accreditation models because reform of the current degree system, and that of the traditional credit system, was considered more urgent. Further work is necessary to tighten coordination among agencies and to establish shared basic criteria.

Most Financing is Local

The major sources of income of public universities are public funds (74%) plus tuition fees or course fees, (13%), with the rest coming from such sources as services rendered and wealth produced by its property and assets.

As universities increasingly have come under the jurisdiction of Autonomous Communities, so has their financing. The Communities are the ones who decide on amounts assigned to each institution. The exception to this model is the constitutional mandate given exclusively to Madrid to safeguard equity in all of Spain through a system of scholarships and grants.

There are as many models of financing as there are Autonomous Communities. They are as diverse as the possibilities for combining different criteria for the allocation of resources and mechanisms for their distribution.

The second major source of income – tuition fees and course fees – is set by the administration, making it illegal for universities to go over the upper limits that have been set. Today, they are far below the real costs of educating students, which makes them similar to those of the surrounding European area.


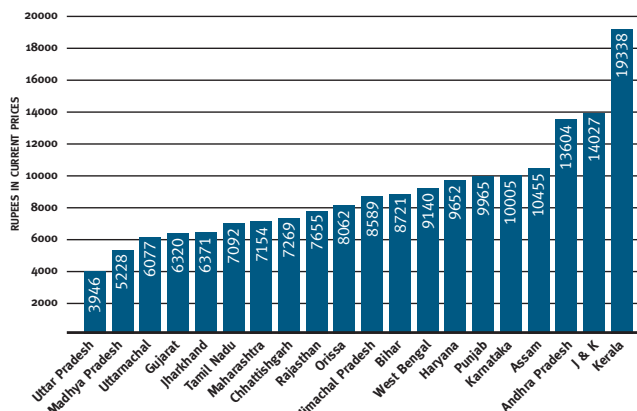
Since the adoption of the 1978 constitution, Spain has been quite successful in the democratization and decentralization of its post-secondary education system. One of its biggest challenges now is to improve co-ordination, co-operation and quality control. This will help ensure a greater diversity of institutions. 

Figure 1: Per student expenditure on higher education in major states (Rupees in current prices), 2003-04.



Source: Estimated using data from Selected Educational Statistics and Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education, MHRD, GOI, 2003-04.

In fact, most state universities have had to resort to alternative methods of resource mobilization, mostly through private recoveries such as charging higher fees to students.

Enforcing Standards

Quality assurance assumes a heightened importance in India because of the increasing visibility of the private post-secondary sector, which is apt to take advantage of institutional ambiguities and concurrent jurisdictions.

In addition, two independent national agencies have been established for accreditation of institutions and programs: the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) – which led to problems of coordination and overlapping jurisdiction.

Proliferation of foreign and private institutions of higher learning, coupled with the limitations of existing regulatory mechanisms, has not only contributed to the unbalanced growth of higher education, but has also adversely affected access, equity, and quality. This critical concern warrants establishment of a National Council for Higher Education that would revamp existing regulatory agencies and remove overlapping jurisdiction.

India may be unique among the countries examined in this publication as the responsibility for higher education has continually changed between the central government and the states. While the centre was responsible for the maintenance of standards, the states were responsible for the establishment and running of institutions of general higher education. This was changed through a constitutional amendment in 1976 and the entire education system, including higher education, was placed under the joint responsibility of the central government and the states. Despite this, the role of the centre in higher education, especially with respect to financing, remained marginal, though several agencies were established to carry out the functions of co-ordination, maintenance of standards, and so on. Yet to meet the needs of higher education, the federal government needs to provide enhanced resources to both the central and the state universities. But funding alone will not guarantee quality. Therefore, because of chronic financial and other disparities among the 28 states, it is up to the central government to promote quality by coordinating quality-assurance activities with the necessary backup of finances. 