

Higher Education Decentralizes

Growth of private universities marks a change in traditional system

BY ROBERTO RODRÍGUEZ-GÓMEZ

THE MAJOR POLITICAL CHANGES THAT RESHAPED MEXICO in the 20th century have been crucial in transforming the country's higher education system. This transformation of higher education took place while Mexico was undergoing even greater changes: moving from a one-party to a multi-party democracy and responding to an era of privatization.

Access to higher education was very limited in Mexico before 1950, owing to the small number of institutions at this level and, above all, to the small proportion of the population who had completed basic education. In 1950, Mexico had less than 24 institutions of higher education with a total enrolment of about 30,000 students. After a period of extraordinary expansion in the 1970s, enrolment had reached more than 800,000 students.

The diversification process in post-secondary education gained momentum in the 1980s and has intensified and matured in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. Key elements in this process included:

- **An increase in private investment** that caused enrolment in private higher education institutions to climb to one-third of the total for the country, and to 40 per cent for the graduate studies level. One factor in this growth is the public system's failure to meet demand and the lack of rigorous academic quality control.
- **Promotion of high-tech studies in the public sector.**
- **Creation of almost 20 new public institutions** in the states, by the federal government, with the participation of state governments.
- **Decentralization of state public universities**, including the creation of facilities in cities that are not state capitals.

As a result, the post-secondary education system doubled its enrolment between 1990 and 2006 to 2.5 million students from 1.2 million.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION ENROLMENT (2006-07)

	Institutions	Enrolment	Percentage
PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS			
Federal universities	4	314,625	12.0
State universities	46	802,539	30.7
Technological universities	60	65,107	2.5
Polytechnic universities	18	7,805	0.3
Intercultural universities	4	1,742	0.1
Technological institutes	211	332,529	12.7
Teacher training colleges	276	94,051	3.6
Public research centres	27	3,227	0.1
Other public institutions	135	127,087	4.9
Total Public	781	1,748,712	66.9
PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS			
Private universities and schools	1,081	816,508	31.2
Teacher training colleges	188	48,206	1.8
Total Private	1,269	846,714	32.4
TOTAL	2,050	2,613,426	100.0

Source: SEP, Form 911 (2007, preliminary)

Federal Financing Changed in 1997

The growth of post-secondary education has been greatly affected by a 1997 amendment to the Fiscal Coordination Law, an integral part of Mexico's new federalism. This budget amendment introduced the concept of "support funds" to supplement the contributions in the National Fiscal Coordination System. It was instituted to improve the public treasury's tax coordination functions and facilitate the decentralization of public services.

Federal and state responsibilities for spending programs and oversight were also specified within this new budget framework. Under it, federal agencies are accountable for the global calculation of the budget to be transferred to each state, and the state records the funds received in their own accounting systems. To reduce the risk of state and municipal entities using resources provided by this law for other activities, a formula of "earmarked funds" was adopted and control mechanisms were established.

This granting of earmarked fiscal resources to the states for education has been a key incentive for encouraging more investment in education, particularly when these funds can be

SPECIAL SECTION

Post-Secondary Education



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Heavy Dependence on Federal Funding

The federal government funds all public post-secondary institutions in support of both teaching and research. The Constitution prohibits their charging tuition fees for undergraduates. They are allowed to establish fees for postgraduate programs that, in most cases, are very low in comparison with those for that same level in private institutions.

The federal formula for distributing funds to institutions to support both teaching and research is based not on quality indicators, but on enrolments, student/faculty ratios, administrative staff numbers, and growing obligations to fund early retirement. Also, federal funds are the primary source of student financial aid through scholarships. One exception is in the state of Zulia. There the governor, Manuel Rosales, who ran unsuccessfully against President Hugo Chavez in the Dec. 2006 elections, has implemented a program consisting of student financial aid to study at private universities.

A large proportion of funding for post-secondary education in Venezuela, as with many other public functions, is provided through revenues from oil production. One result of this dependence on oil and the increase in oil prices over time is that spending on post-secondary education in Venezuela is relatively high – 2.4 per cent of GDP. As well, oil revenues were crucial in providing funds for scholarships and loans, an area in which the states of Venezuela have done little or nothing.


The federal government is also the primary provider of research funds concentrated in the areas it considers critical for national development.

Other matters controlled by the central government include the admissions process, regulated through the Academic Aptitude Test that measures such abilities as numeric, reading, and comprehension, the results of which determine the distribution of students among the institutions and careers. This test had been criticized by many observers for promoting exclusion, and in response the test was recently eliminated by the federal government.

The Revolution Comes to the University

The government has just announced its policies for post-secondary education for the next few years. According to the new plan, each state will have a specialized university which will be oriented towards an area of knowledge: health sciences, basic sciences, economics, arts, languages and tourism, oil, disaster prevention, and human security. Many of the strategies already implemented will be continued.

Thus, the federal government is deepening its control on all matters related to post-secondary education. Many observers consider this a step backwards, inasmuch as the country was being driven to a more decentralized model before the current revolutionary period began.

At this time, there seems to be little room for negotiation between the centralized federal government and the states that have lost most of whatever autonomy they might previously have had. Therefore, it appears that in post-secondary education, as in almost any other government function in Venezuela today, the federal government will pursue those policies that impose the ideological content of President Chavez's "socialism for the 21st century". Post-secondary education in Venezuela is proving to be a convenient mechanism to succeed in that goal. 

MEXICO [FROM PAGE 21]

used for programs such as teacher training for basic education and high-tech programs.

The new mechanism for providing funds coexists with more flexible instruments for allocating decentralized expenditures, including programs subject to operating rules approved each year in the federal budget, as well as joint federal-state agreements to finance specific programs. The joint agreements have been used to meet states' demands for the creation of new public institutions, or to increase the subsidies granted to state universities. Also, autonomous federal and state public universities have taken steps to obtain special allocations directly from the federal congress.

Public and Private Universities Compete

Mexico has nearly 800 public institutions which enrol two-thirds of the 2.6 million post-secondary students. The state universities, which account for roughly one-half of the public sector enrolments, are autonomous and receive both federal and state subsidies. Federal universities and technological institutes, now a much smaller post-secondary presence, are maintained largely with federal funds. The decentralized technological institutes are legally dependent on the states and are financed through concurrent subsidies.

For the most part, training of teachers is handled by 276 public institutions that enrol about 95,000 students – four per cent of enrolments – and are subsidized through funds transferred to the states.

The 27 public research centres, subsidized with federal funds in the science and technology sector and some state subsidies, provide graduate education to more than 3,000 students.

The private sector is the fastest growing segment of post-secondary education in Mexico. There are now more than 1,200 private institutions that enrol roughly one-third of all students. These private institutions are picking up much of the growing demand for post-secondary education and the trend will likely continue for the foreseeable future.

Continuing Tensions Unresolved

Despite advances toward decentralization and federalization of post-secondary education, there are significant tensions and dilemmas that call for broad solutions. One key problem is the lack of coordination and regulation with a federal approach, though the federal education authority still retains important powers in the field of curriculum orientation of the sectors it coordinates, particularly in high tech education and teacher training.

Quality-control policies focused on the public universities of the states, based on the provision of additional federal resources, also demonstrate a centralist bias as they continue to be regulated and governed exclusively by the federal authority. Finally, there is a lack of norms for the stable regulation of federal and state powers in this area. No less important is the obvious tension between the autonomy granted by law to most federal and state public universities and the influence of federal public policies on the institutions.

Mexico's road leading from a higher education system that is extensively decentralized, but subject to central public policies, to a truly federal system formed by multiple state systems still lies ahead. 