

# Do Revolution and Higher Education Mix?



REUTERS/KIMBERLY WHITE

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez (l.) greets supporters at a university ceremony in Caracas.

BY MARIA CRISTINA PARRA-SANDOVAL

**V**ENEZUELA'S FIRST CONSTITUTION IN 1811 STATED THAT the country was a federal state. However, most observers agree that the common denominator for all of Venezuela's constitutions since then has been a principle of federation in form but not in practice. The result has been a weak federal structure.

The most important strength of the system has been the regular election of governors and mayors in each of the 23 states of the country. Some competences have been partially ceded by the federal government, especially those related to health services, water and energy provision, as well as basic and secondary education. Post-secondary education has always been the responsibility of the federal government. Some have called this centralized federalism, because the power of the central government has been stronger than the idea of federalism.

After 40 years of democratic rule, in 1998 the new government of President Hugo Chavez was elected with the aim of re-founding the republic. The first step was to approve a new national Constitution in 1999 that had, as a key feature, movement toward a social and inclusive participatory democracy instead of the representative democracy that the 1961 Constitution had established.

However, the decentralization and transfer of services to states and municipalities that was promised by President Hugo Chavez has not happened. Most observers agree that Venezuela, as a nation, is going back to a more centralized and authoritarian government.

Post-secondary education has been one of the untouched issues as the federal government continues to be the primary public entity responsible for this level of education. Funding, student enrolment and admission decisions, and the creation of institutions and new academic programs were under the control of the federal Ministry of Education until 2002, and then under the federal Ministry of Higher Education, created in that same year. The Ministry now also has taken over the budget distribution among the universities, which had been done by the National Council of Universities.

## Expansion and Diversification

Two major trends have characterized Venezuela's post-secondary education experience in recent decades. First, the system has expanded from seven institutions in 1958 to the 169 it has today. This growth peaked in the seventies, when enrolments grew by more than 20 percent per year for the first half of the decade. Second, expansion came with diversification after 1971, with the creation of many non-university institutions (community colleges and technological institutes), offering 3-year careers and faster entry into the labour market. As a result, the Venezuela post-secondary system is now a binary one, comprising 49 universities and 120 post-secondary non-university institutions.

Of the 49 universities, six are official universities that are autonomous, meaning that they have academic, organizational, administrative and financial autonomy, even though they depend on the federal government for funds. There are also 43 experimental universities that only have academic autonomy and are directly run by the central government.

More students – 58 per cent – enrol in universities than non-universities in Venezuela. More than half of the universities in Venezuela are private institutions that, although they account for one-fifth of all university enrolments, generally have a low profile and social impact. By the same token, more than half of the 120 non-university institutions are also private, representing 70 per cent of enrolments in the non-university sector.

SPECIAL SECTION

## Post-Secondary Education



**Maria Cristina Parra-Sandoval**, a sociologist, is currently full professor in the University of Zulia in Maracaibo, Venezuela, responsible for higher education research.

## 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. 