

Public and private higher education in comparative perspective*

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Abstract

Private higher education has been growing in South Africa, leading to intense concerns about its possible positive and negative effects in the fulfillment of broader goals. This article provides a comparative perspective, examining the experience of Latin American countries on the subject, first regarding the impact of the private sector on issues of access, equity, extension work, research and the provision of educated manpower for the new economy, and later on issues of regulation and convergence. Since most private higher education in the LA region is done with little investments and catering to less affluent students, the article discusses the possible relevance of this kind of education, and the experience of public agencies to regulate it. The article concludes that the private sector plays a useful role, but cannot replace public institutions. There is some convergence between the public and private sector, but that they will continue to coexist and perform different functions.

Private higher education has been growing in South Africa since the publication of the 1997 White Paper on higher education. This growth has led to intense concerns among policy makers, participants and observers of South Africa's higher education environment. The authors of the National Plan quote the White Paper on the problems associated with unrestrained competition and profit-driven higher education:

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“Lack of institutional focus and mission incoherence, rampant and even destructive competition in which historically advantaged institutions could reinforce their inherited privileges; unwarranted duplication of activities and programmes; exclusive focus on ‘only’ paying programmes; excessive marketisation and commodification with little attention to social and educational goals; and insufficient attention to quality” (South Africa, Department of Education 1997)

This is not, however, a stand against competition, or against private higher education per se. The National Plan document states that

“On the contrary, the Ministry welcomes competition that promotes innovation and enhances quality. However, competition between institutions must be regulated within a national framework that promotes and facilitates the sustainability of the higher education system. Furthermore, the burgeoning private higher education sector requires more stringent regulation to ensure that it complements the public sector and contributes to the overall human resource needs of the country.”

It would be presumptuous, coming from Latin America, to try to tell South Africans how they should deal with these issues. Latin American higher education has its own problems of quality, equity and focus, and the relationships between private education and the public sector has been often contentious. At the same time, Latin American countries have been dealing with issues of private education for a long time, in a variety of ways, and their experiences may serve as a backdrop to discuss a set of broad issues that concern us all (Wolff, Gonzáles, and Navarro 2002; Levy 1986).

Functions of higher education, public and private

South Africa’s White Paper states that the role on higher education should be “to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities”, and the question on how to maintain South African higher education attuned to the public good has been a matter of great concern (Jonathan 2001). How have Latin American countries dealt with these functions? What have been the roles played by public and private institutions? To what extent can we generalize from these experiences?

“To redress past inequalities” – equity, social conditions and discrimination

In Latin America, as in South Africa, inequity has strong ethnical, cultural and economic components. No country has had the experience of explicit apartheid, but differences in wealth, occupation opportunities and access to education are strongly correlated with ethnic and cultural origins. Access of native, black and mixed-blood persons to higher education in Latin America is often lower than in South Africa during apartheid, and there are no equivalents to historically black and segregated universities in the region.

Latin American countries became independent early in the 19th century, and adopted the principles of formal democracy. Social inequity, established by colonial occupation, slavery, and plantation economies, developed and grew regardless of these principles. No rules prevented blacks or natives to enter higher education, except for their lack of resources and cultural capital. Latin American universities remained restricted and elitist until well into the 20th century, when new social groups started to demand access to some kind of tertiary education. Countries responded to this trend in two ways: increasing the size and reach of public institutions, or opening space for the private sector to fill in the gaps.

Mexico and Argentina exemplify the first option. Still today, admittance to the national universities of Mexico and Buenos Aires, among the largest in the world, is free and open to all finishing secondary education, irrespective of grades or qualifications. This generosity is justified by the role universities are supposed to play in creating new opportunities, developing competence and maintaining high and alive the flames of science, culture, democracy, freedom and social justice.

There are reasons to wonder, however, whether these noble goals are being reached. It is easy for students to get in, but not as simple to succeed. Because of their size, complexity and conflicting goals, these large public institutions are often ineffectual and wasteful, in spite of selected pockets of quality. In Mexico, only about half the students ever conclude their course work, and only a third ever get their degrees. There is thus internal discrimination, based on the principles of merit, but related to the students' social, economic and cultural origins. The selected few that graduate may or may not perform socially useful activities. Their private gains, however, are clear, while their studies are paid by the excluded majority.

The other option has been to limit access to public institutions through selection exams. In principle, smaller and more selective institutions can be more efficient and keep higher standards, and this has actually occurred in many cases. Three countries in Latin America exemplify this path, Brazil, Chile and Colombia. In Brazil today, public higher education is free, and absorbs about a third of the students. Chile and Colombia charge for public education, and enroll, respectively, about half and 40% of the students

The private sector has developed to respond to these situations, opening up elite institutions in niches left empty by the large public institutions, and providing mass higher education when the public sector is more closed. In practice, in all countries, public and private institutions provide both elite and mass higher education, but in different degrees. In all countries, access and, more importantly, completion of higher education in Latin America is socially biased, and neither of the two modes of responding to expansion seems to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem. The provision of uniform higher education opportunities to highly unequal students does not seem to be the best approach; it makes more sense to provide differentiated opportunities and learning conditions according to the needs of different segments. Private higher education, in some cases, can contribute to increase inequity, when providing good quality education in profitable fields for students who can pay. In other circumstances, it can make higher education a little less inequitable, when providing low cost education and opportunities for students who are rejected by the entrance examinations of selective, public institutions. Appropriate schemes of student loans and subsidies can compensate for differences in tuition costs. On balance, it is not obvious that countries that adopted open admission policies are more successful in reducing inequity than those who did not.

“To serve a new social order” – values, culture and ideology

The meaning of this expression in post-apartheid South Africa does not require further elaboration. More broadly, however, this expression conveys the notion that higher education is not just about providing students with a profession and skills, but also with values and attitudes that contribute to build their countries' national and cultural identities. The historical dispute between laic elites and the Church for the control of education in Latin America was very similar in tone to the

one in France, which led to the establishment of a system of national, public and laic education in that country. In Latin America, different outcomes took place. In Chile and Colombia, Catholic and public universities coexisted; in Mexico, the public sector dominated; in Brazil, in the 1930s, the Catholic Church tried to take control of public education, and decided, later on, to create its own universities.

Since the early 20th century, Latin American public universities were the scene of intense political mobilization of students, which infused them with the ideals of progress, democracy and social equity. They sensed they were the bearers of a new social order, still to be created. The “Reform movement” was marked by strong revolutionary rhetoric, and became the training ground for most of the region’s political elite. The ideologies of the Reform were not very clear and consistent, but some of their consequences were the strengthening university self-rule, student participation in academic governance, and policies of open admission. In the sixties, most student leaders began to equate the future social order with socialism, and, when a wave of military authoritarian regimes swept the region, they looked to Cuba and China as sources of inspiration and support. In some countries – Colombia, Peru, Venezuela – students became the leaders of long-lasting revolutionary movements, some of them still active today. In others, as time went by, many of the students became teachers and professors, and continued to push forward for their values and aspirations through their unions and other organizations.

Little of that happened in Church-dominated, private universities. In spite of their origin as confessional institutions, hoping to create elites that would combine professional competence with adherence to Christian principles and values, the trend for most Catholic universities was to soften their more militant stands, while providing a haven for students willing to escape the highly politicized and troubled environment of public institutions. Most private institutions established after the sixties and seventies are not religious, and do not aspire to play any significant role in the definition and construction of a new “social order”. Some of them are community-based, some are charitable, and most of them are for profit, even when legislation would not allow them to be so.

Higher education in Latin America continues to be fraught with conflicts and diverging interpretations about the role of public and private institutions in the

promotion of broad values and agendas. My own view is that, although ideological discourses remain strong in many sectors, conflicts in higher education today are less about general views and conceptions about the best social order, which are most often self-serving, than about the narrow interests of teachers and employees' unions, and the benefits and privileges of students. If higher education is to play a role in the construction of a new social order, this will be more related to concrete results, in terms of education, than because of the ideological and political discourse developed and put forward by their leaders and participants.

“Pressing social needs” – community work

There are two ways in which universities can respond to pressing social needs, besides their general role as education providers: service and research. Services are usually described as community, or “extension work”, very broad terms used to refer to different activities performed by academics and students to the benefit of the surrounding communities (Subotzky 1999).

In the past, in Latin America, community work used to be understood as charity, with academics going to poorer communities to provide them with information, services and support. For politically active students and teachers, this kind of work was often interpreted as political mobilization – a way of helping the disadvantaged to become aware of their needs, and to organize to fight for their rights.

A special type of extension work is the health care provided by teaching hospitals to the public. In Brazil and some other places, teaching or university hospitals became major providers of public health, requiring large and specialized staff and independent sources of income. In some universities, the budget and personnel of these hospitals can be as large as a third or half of those of the university as a whole.

Another type of extension work, not often recognized as such, is the provision of short-term, specialization courses for non-regular students. Specialization and extension courses can become important sources of income for public institutions working under budgetary restraints. Since they do not provide legal professional degrees, they are free from external oversight. Their certificates, however, can have

market value, and these courses can be the only educational resource available to adults willing to improve their competence and skills beyond or aside the regular degree programs.

In Latin America, there is an effort by practitioners to place extension at the very core of higher education, at the same level of research and teaching, or even at a higher level, as a two-way road linking the universities with society, bringing together academic and popular knowledge, making the universities more democratic, and fostering interdisciplinarity (Nogueira 2001, p. 68). In practice, however, extension has always been a minor activity in most institutions, except in areas like health, where community services are an integral part of teaching, and its full potential for developing more effective and relevant education have not been subject of adequate consideration.

Usually, private institutions are less active in extension work than public ones. They often lack the political motivation, their revenue comes mostly from regular teaching, and they tend not to offer courses in areas such as health, requiring expensive equipment and permanent services to the public. In the public sector, however, extension work can become a powerful mechanism to make the institutions more responsive to short-term market demands and more similar to the private sector in their businesslike approach to possible consumers of services and education.

“Pressing social needs” - research

Most countries in Latin America define their higher education systems as Humboldtian – academic institutions where education is provided by scholars permanently engaged in research. Scientific research today, however, is a specialized activity, requiring large investments and dedicated professionals, which are very different from the usual professional or lecturer in an undergraduate teaching institution. In Latin America, as in the United States and in many European countries, research is concentrated in a few institutions, usually in association with advanced graduate programs. Although the institutional setting is academic, the selection of research topics can be very concrete and practical, in the areas of health, agriculture, technology and social issues. In practice, however, the effective contribution of university research to the solution of pressing social needs is usually

not very high. This can be attributed, on the user's side, to the inability of governments, public agencies and social organizations to identify their research needs and ask the proper questions; on the supplier's side, to the fragmented ways in which university research is organized; and to the cultural conflicts between the values, motivations and working practices of academics and those of the potential buyers and users of their professional services. With few exceptions, when governments, companies and social organization think they need research, they tend to establish their own research units, or to get ready-made technology from private suppliers in the country or abroad.

There are, however, important exceptions to this general rule. In some fields, like engineering, agriculture and economics, some public universities have developed strong links with the private sector and public agencies, developing new products and technologies, providing consultancy, and carrying on analysis and studies at their client's requests. To handle these resources, public institutions have created private-like foundations that are flexible, can provide additional income to the university staff, and invest in equipment and installations. This has led to strong differences within public institutions – modern and well-equipped installations side by side with others in poor conditions, and well-paid staff side by side with others limited to the basic salaries governments can provide.

One would expect private institutions to be more flexible and ready to adapt to external demands, and to respond more effectively to requests for research and technical assistance. What they may have in flexibility, however, they usually lack in density and stability. To do research, it is necessary to have a highly qualified staff, equipments, and established tradition in the field. All of that require long-term investments, which private institutions seldom can afford. Thus, private institutions tend to stay away from research, except in some cases where narrow niches and opportunities can be found.

In short, in Latin America at least, higher education institutions have some ability to respond to pressing social needs, whether through extension work or through research, in public and in private institutions. This is done through local decisions of institutions and departments, and not through some kind of broad design or strategy. This situation could be improved, but it is probably just as well.

The main function of higher education institutions should be to educate the generations that go through their benches, and an excessive concern to respond to pressing needs that are the responsibility of governments and specialized agencies, can lead them to risk losing sight of their core responsibilities.

“New realities and opportunities” – the challenges of the knowledge economy and globalization

What are the new realities and opportunities to which higher education institutions have to face and respond? The usual answer is to mention the requirements of the knowledge economy and globalization. What are, more precisely, the knowledge requirements of the “knowledge economy”, and how can higher education institutions respond to globalization? What are the possible roles of public and private higher education to meet these requirements?

It is easy, but inadequate, to answer this question with the traditional view that higher education should provide everybody with enhanced scientific and technological competencies, to better participate in an economy centered on competitiveness and innovation (Muller and Subotzky 2001). Looking at the labor market, we can see in Latin America that traditional industrial jobs are being destroyed and not replaced by high technology alternatives, which are laborsaving and based on internationally concentrated research. A study of the existing data and projections carried out by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America shows that employment for persons in professional activities is not expected to rise very significantly in the region in the foreseeable future. For eight Latin American countries, the percentage of professionals in the labor force at the end of the 1990's was 3.1%. For Chile, the figure in 2000 was 8.4%, and the projection for 2015, given the trends of the nineties and assuming an income growth rate of 4.8 for the occupations, is 10.4%. For Brazil, the figure for 2000 is 2.1%, and the projection for 2015, with a similar growth rate, is 3.5% (Sainz and La Fuente R. 2001). Most jobs that exist or are being created today are in the services, some of them complex enough to require specialized education – in health, management, law, communications – but others requiring few or no special competencies – commerce, tourism, personal services, and the like.

Looking at higher education, we see that most students are in areas requiring at most general and “social” skills –communication, reading and writing, some notions of administration and management (García Guadilla 2000). The cultural and intellectual gap between science based and general education seem to be wider today than when C. P. Snow coined the “two cultures” metaphor fifty years ago (Snow 1959), and there are those who argue that the growing gap between scientific knowledge and general culture and education is a distinctive feature of post-modern societies (Merelman 2000).

It seems, therefore, that the large inequalities in quality and content of higher education in Latin American institutions are coherent with the skewed demands of the labor market. Both public and private institutions, providing different kinds of education to specific segments, can make play useful roles. In a limited number of the best graduate and research programs, work takes place at high levels of competency, in full contact with the best science and technologies available in the world today. This can be achieved by a combination of very high standards, integration in international networks, and selective policies of identifying niches in which countries and their best research institutions can participate.

For most students in the professional and semi-professional careers, however, general skills and attitudes seem to be more important than the accumulation of disembodied and out-of-date scientific facts and methodologies. To teach “general skills and attitudes” is easier said than done (Fallows and Steven 2000). It should include, at least, the abilities to read and write, to interpret data, to look for information, and to participate in social and collective undertakings and collaborative work. It is less related to specific knowledge contents than to culture, values and attitudes. For this reason, it is not something that can be easily codified and reduced to manuals and workbooks. Higher education institutions, public or private, to work well, should become moral and cultural institutions, transmitting values and attitudes, not by ideological or religious indoctrination, but by the living example of their academic staff. Which values and attitudes are these, and how to build moral and cultural institutions, are questions we have to ponder, without hoping to answer them here.

Is there a place for “low quality” education?

As public and private institutions expand by providing education for students with limited educational backgrounds, without significant increases in human resources and equipment, they cannot maintain the high standards that are typical of well-endowed, elite institutions. Most private higher education in Latin America is like this, and there are reasons to question whether this kind of “low quality education” has any redeeming value. A recent paper from the Inter American Development Bank argues that it does (Castro and Navarro 1999, p. 57). For the authors, these courses perform important functions, since they add knowledge and information to students coming from very limited backgrounds, providing them with credentials that may open new opportunities or improve their standing in their jobs. They recognize that these course programs are often badly taught, and many students feel frustrated because they cannot get to the professions they were hoping to enter. However, they argue that the lack of correspondence between degrees and jobs is to be expected, since these courses work mostly as providers of general education, rather than of specialized competencies.

Their arguments are important to dispel the notion that there is only one type of higher education, and to call attention to the need for policy makers to pay more attention to the positive role private and public providers are playing in opening education opportunities for persons without conditions or access to enter more prestigious careers and institutions. This should not be taken, however, as an argument in favor of any kind of education, but as a plea to take more seriously the effort to learn more about what general and vocational education can actually be.

Instruments

What instruments can the public sector use to make sure that private higher education institutions – and, for that matter, public ones – perform the functions for which they were created or allowed to exist?

Legal regulations, formal controls and education councils.

Both Spain and Portugal have a long tradition of governing through very detailed legal ordinances, which Latin American countries applied in their attempts to reign over their higher education institutions. In practice, the main function of this

complex legislation and mechanisms was to decide who would be allowed or not to open a university or degree program in a given place.

With university autonomy, collective bodies – Councils of Rectors, Councils of Education - were created in many countries. These bodies function as buffers between government and the institutions, and arenas where the interests of the different higher education sectors can be played out and look for common grounds. Traditionally, these Councils work like judiciary courts, with specific cases being judged one by one, and establishing jurisprudence. A comparative analysis of these bodies is still to be made, but they seem to be moving in two directions. On one hand, they have tended to evolve into policy bodies, writing up recommendations, guidelines and long-term views, while leaving individual decisions to the education ministries. On the other, they work as legitimizing bodies for new types of assessment and accreditation procedures, being developed also by the administration. It seems fair to say that, as higher education becomes more complex and expensive, the relative power and influence of these collective bodies tend to be reduced. It is not clear, however, that central administrations have the resources and competencies to take responsibility for effective policy implementation.

Central Planning and regulation

Years ago, it was assumed that it would be possible to define the number of medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, nurses, librarians and other professionals a country would need according to some technical criteria, and plan the education institutions according to well-defined targets. This approach was typical of the socialist economies, and was also proposed for many other countries, in Europe and Latin America, without much success. One of the underlying issues was whether the institutions, particularly in the private sector, were graduating more persons than what was required by the job market in some fields, and should be contained in their expansion. This was a matter of concern for the professional corporations, such as the lawyers', who watched with apprehension as their ranks swell, with undesirable colleagues coming from unknown institutions and with unknown abilities.

This issue used to be discussed in terms of the need to identify the “social demand” that would exist for each profession or skill, not to be confounded with short-term market demands for professional work and education. This kind of

manpower planning, however, was an impossible task, given the different institutional arrangements and traditions of professional work in each country, and the unpredictability of changes in technology and organizational practices. (Fulton, Gordon, and Williams 1982).

Today, the main concern is not with quantitative targets for specific professions, but with the general need to provide society with the proper combination of specialized, generic and “transferable” skills. Targeting is still possible, but very differently from what was attempted in the past. Careful observation and studies can reveal situations of too few or too many people applying, being admitted or graduating from specific fields, and governments can direct positive or negative incentives to public and private institutions training these students. This kind of incremental fine-tuning requires, however, a level of information and clarity of objectives that no high education authority in the Latin American region can claim to possess.

Professional corporations can still influence access to their ranks through two mechanisms. One is through active participation in assessment bodies being established by governments for the different subjects; the second is through independent certification procedures for the students after they complete their courses. This is now common practice among lawyers and in medical specialties in many countries, and is an important departure from the old tradition by which the professional certificates were issued by higher education institutions.

This separation between academic degrees and professional certification has several advantages. It frees to higher education institutions to experiment and innovate, while providing an external indication on whether the students are being successful in their professions. Ideally, in a pluralist society, professional certification should not be provided by governments, but by independent professional associations, competing for credibility and recognition.

Assessment

There is ample consensus, today, that the governments' ability to control and assure the quality of higher education institutions from above is limited at best, and one alternative is to make these institutions to compete for quality. This can be done

by tying public subsidies to the quality of the students the institutions can attract, as in Chile; by associating fellowships and other resources to good marks in peer review assessments; by linking salaries and other benefits to academic or teaching excellence, as is done in part in Mexico and Brazil; and by the development of national standards and assessment for undergraduate students and their institutions.

Some of the benefits and problems associated with higher education assessment are visible in the Brazilian experience. Since the seventies, the country has maintained a well-regarded procedure for the assessment of graduate education, based on peer review and the use of indicators of research performance. The extension of this experience to undergraduate education is proving more daunting, however. Peer review, which works with some limitations for science-based research and graduate education, does not work as easily at the undergraduate level, where there are no objective indicators of results, and the standards for quality are likely to be controversial or multiple. In recent years, Brazil pioneered a new assessment procedure, a nationwide test applied to last-year students of all professional course programs. Individual results are kept confidential, but the averages obtained by the course programs are published and used as a yardstick to measure their quality. This assessment has had great impact in public opinion, and has allowed the government to try to move against some programs of exceeding low quality in the private sector. There are, however, some important drawbacks. First, these tests measure only results, not added value, leading to a strong bias in favor of course programs that are able to select the best students in the first place. Second, the contents of the exams are defined by specialists coming mostly from elite and established institutions, leading to uniform standards that thwart differentiation. Third, the government publishes the placement of each course program along a normal distribution within each field, but there are no defined quality standards and cut points - the public is not informed, for instance, if one can rely on a graduate from a "c" medical school for an appendectomy.

Other countries that have tried to implement national assessments have faced similar problems. In some places, the large, established universities have refused to participate; in others, the results are not published. In part, this resistance is a manifestation of the institutions' defensiveness against external assessments. But is also related to the fact that, interesting and innovative as these assessment may be,

they are still too experimental and controversial to be used as the sole criteria to seal the fate and reputation of academic institutions.

Positive and negative roles of private provision: old assumptions and new realities

The Latin American experience suggests that we should not look at public and private education in polarized terms. They both perform useful and often complementary functions, and both have problems and drawbacks. Governments have the responsibility to regulate and look for quality and relevance in both, but their ability to do so is more limited than it is commonly thought.

Private and public markets: convergence

It is common to think on the private world as governed by market competition, and the public as governed by normative principles and mandates. However, markets depend also on common values and institutions, which define the “rules of the game”, and assure the good faith of the players; while, in recent years, there has been a tendency for governments to create “quasi markets” for the distribution of public resources. Thus, science councils routinely establish competition among researchers for their grants; students compete for places in universities, and, later, for jobs in public institutions; and private companies dispute bids in procurement markets established by the public sector. It is not true, therefore, that competition is inimical to the world of science, culture, academic and public life; on the contrary, it is a very important part of it; and it is not true that markets are inimical to values and institutions.

It is also not true that education and profit are always geared by opposite goals and motivations. The current legislation in Brazil admits that private institutions can be for profit or not, depending on whether they are truly philanthropic, like some religious and community-based institutions. For-profit institutions have to pay taxes like any other private concern, the assumption being that they should behave as any honest business company, selling good, value-for-money education. In the public sector, an outdated legislation still requires that all academics should earn the same salaries, according to rules applied uniformly to all national institutions. This situation makes the universities unable to compete for talent, and to lose their best people to

the private sector or institutions abroad. This extreme symmetry is compensated, in practice, by the ability of academics to increase their income through participation in research projects. More recently, in Brazil as well as in Mexico, the government created salary incentives to stimulate dedication to teaching and research in public institutions. Thus, the notion that people and institutions in public education and research should be financially rewarded according to their work, dedication and entrepreneurship, is also gaining ground.

My main proposition is that public and private higher education institutions are converging in many ways, and this is a positive trend. As higher education becomes more expensive, and as the private sector becomes the provider of higher education for large segments of the student population, the need to treat public education also as a private good (and therefore subject to tuition), and private education as also a social good (and therefore eligible for support), become stronger.

Public institutions are changing the ways they function, and becoming more entrepreneurial in their daily activities. Universities have to dispute resources with each other and with other social programs in the public sector. Besides, they have to look for other sources of resources and support, in the private sector, from other government agencies, from international donors. For this, they need to change the way they are organized, with more power going to management positions, or through decentralization into semi-independent business units, associated with academic departments and institutes. Private institutions, on the other hand, have to respond to public regulations and incentives, and, as they become more complex and bring in large staffs, they have to become more institutionalized, and cannot be ruled any longer as pure business concerns.

This convergence is far from being complete, and it is not likely that the differences between public and private institutions will disappear. On the contrary, we can expect that the range of institutional formats and motivations will continue to increase, together with the development of better policy instruments to make sure that they all work to the best interests of society.

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