

Editorial

Crisis and Challenges of the Latin American University

*Francisco López Segrera*¹

¹ Adjunct professor at the Higher Institute of International Relations (Cuba); Consultant of the Global University Network for Innovation, Catalan Association of Public Universities, Barcelona; adjunct professor of the Center for Strategic Thinking and Prospective of Universidad Externado de Colombia. lopezsegrerafrancisco@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5805-2327>

Until the 1980s, public higher education (HE), with institutional and academic autonomy, had, in the region, predominance over private education. By late 1980s and early 1990s, globalization implied, for Latin America and the Caribbean, the application of neoliberal strategies. This caused the replacement of the typical policy of the welfare state, with others of reduced funding for public services and their privatization.

Said market strategies had an impact on the growing privatization of HE and on the deterioration of public universities, given the lack of appropriate funding, among other factors. In spite of this, during the 1990s – and especially after the rise to power of post-neoliberal governments (1999-2014) – great expansion of HE took place in the region, a process that has continued and has increased.

The principal changes registered in HE systems, in higher education institutions (HEIS), and in universities from the Latin American and Caribbean region, as of the 1990s, have been the following:

1. Proposals and support from international organizations, like the World Bank and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), aimed at achieving the diversification of funding sources.
2. Reforms in the management and governance of HEIs.
3. Generation of stimuli to diversify the educational system.
4. Development of evaluation and accreditation processes, and creation of agencies in this regard in different countries.
5. Creation of more efficient links among teaching and the development of industry and research, through triple-helix programs – university, industry, and government – and quadruple-helix programs – university, industry, government, and civil society.
6. Promotion of deregulation, based on the existence of regulations, which gave rise to new higher education legislation.
7. Creation of competitive funds that involved granting extraordinary funds to universities and university professors, upon presentation of research proposals, in the case of universities, and based on their merits and background, in the case of professors.
8. Adoption, in some public higher education systems, of practices to increase state funding, like tuition fees – especially for graduate courses – and consulting and advisory services.
9. High increase in higher education enrollment and expansion of its institutions, with the vigorous emergence of private universities, in many cases of low quality (called “demand absorption”) and with a commercial yearning that distinguishes them from the traditional private nonprofits, such as Catholic universities.
10. Diversification and differentiation of the higher education system, and expansion and differentiation of programs and careers, which caused the emergence of a large number of short-cycle and graduate programs.
11. Development of information and communication technologies, and of virtual higher education, which accelerated exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021).
12. Transnationalization from virtual offers.
13. Development of regional integration policies.

Despite these changes, there is broad consensus on the crisis of the Latin American university, expressed in denominations and metaphors, like: “pseudo-universities”, “the university under siege”, “the university at the crossroads”, “the deconstructed university”, “the university in ruins”, “the university in the shadows”, “the necessary university”, “the university without resources” [1,2].

There is also talk of a global university crisis. Boaventura de Sousa Santos considers that, globally, the university is going through a triple crisis: of hegemony, because it no longer has a monopoly on research; of legitimacy, given that it is perceived as an institution that forbids access to the most disadvantaged and is increasingly hierarchical; and institutional, due to difficulties in preserving its autonomy in the face of the pressure of market demands and the tendency to view both public and private universities as a company [3].

Moreover, rankings are becoming increasingly fashionable. By mid-1980s, the Asian Wall Street Journal included, in a list of the ten best universities in the world, only four (Cambridge, Oxford, Sorbonne, Tokyo) from outside the United States. According to Altbach and Salmi, some of these rankings have certain respectability, like that by the U.S. News and by the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) [4]. Much is debated about the indicators used by the THES and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University. What happens is that the rankings are constructed on the basis of parameters – number of Nobel Prizes, professors from the university with works in the Citation Index, doctorates and master's degrees, equipment, financing... - characteristic of “world-class” universities from the Anglo-Saxon world, especially the United States and England, and which, additionally, privilege the hard sciences in detriment of the social and human sciences.

Applying the standards and values of the main academic powers will not accurately measure quality at a global level, nor will it lead to global rankings of interest. In the academic world of the 21st century, competitive and market oriented, the rankings are inevitable and probably necessary. The challenge is to ensure that they provide accurate and relevant criteria, and measure the right questions to guide the development of universities in their own environment.

The debate around world-class universities is growing, this concept refers to those with globally recognized excellence (Yale, Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, Sorbonne, Tokyo...). However, developing countries, rather than emulating to obtain indicators often difficult to achieve in their specific conditions, should pay more attention to a university that promotes sustainable development of autochthonous nature. More important than having the indicators of world-class universities or research universities; more important than having a Nobel prize, is to guarantee good medical schools and good training programs for agricultural engineers, and educators to ensure an adequate level of “human and social capital”, that is, human resources in conditions of generating development with equity in “national research universities” (NRU).

Since the 1980s, enrollment grew exponentially, but public resources diminished significantly. Expenditures per student, as a percentage of gross domestic product, fell from 163% to 77% between 1980 and 1995. This drop in high-income countries was only from 39% to 26%, but in middle- and low-income countries, the drop was from 259% to 91% [5].

The HEIS, as cultural projects and providers of as cultural projects and providers of public goods, have been replaced by HEIs linked to markets as “entrepreneurial universities” [6].

Although the crisis of hegemony is irreversible in the knowledge society, its legitimacy and institutional crisis is not. The first can be solved with appropriate scholarship policies in the Latin American region, which broaden access to those with the corresponding academic merit in the most disadvantaged sectors. The second can be avoided by keeping the university from becoming a service accessed through consumption and not through citizenship. This implies leading a reform in line with an updated national project, which considers education a public good.

The NRU see their legitimacy questioned by Anglo-Saxon models aimed at a certain productive model characteristic of globalization. The challenge for NRU is how to preserve their diversity of traditions; how to continue providing a valuable service to national states and the local level; and, simultaneously, be at the state-of-the-art of the various branches of knowledge.

Some NRU of the region have avoided denationalization and irrelevance, taking texts from world-class universities, but linking undergraduate and graduate students to national specificities. In the case of Cuba, its medical students used textbooks from Johns Hopkins, but from the first year were linked to hospitals and health centers. Those from Engineering used textbooks from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but also early on they worked in industry. In summary, it is necessary to link the state-of-the-art at a global level of knowledge with the reality of our countries and revalue the ancestral knowledge of Afro and indigenous communities.

Some of the main challenges currently faced by HE in Latin America and the Caribbean are: rapid increase of privatization; insufficient public funding; lack of access for the poorest; weak investment in research, technological development and innovation; scarce scientific production; high academic dropout rate; and low enrollment rate, despite its improvement, compared to developed countries.

We are witnesses to the crisis of the university in Latin America and the Caribbean – and globally – not only in terms of management, funding, accreditation and curriculum, but also in terms of its very conception. We must adapt the university to a setting that shows radical changes in basic concepts and identities. The challenge consists in the construction of the new university, in reinventing it within this climate of uncertainty and global economic crisis, preventing the triumph of pessimism.

Universities, whether public or private, should share a clear vocation of service to the public, to society. Further, the university's autonomy cannot avoid its social commitment and, therefore, the obligation to be accountable to society. The university must fulfill the social function society expects of it, not only in equity in access, but in terms of being at the state-of-the-art in knowledge, information and proposed solutions for adequate sustainable human and social development.

It is the moment to recognize that, despite progress and achievements in a few exceptional HEIs; in Latin America and the Caribbean, we have not been able to crystallize a new university model in which the production of knowledge predominates, and not its mere transmission. Within this process, a priority we should develop would be the socialization of knowledge. Thus, HEIS would not be limited to being mere academic institutions, rather, universities would become leaders of social change.

The HEIS are influenced and conditioned by the policies of the nation state and by the global trends of the capitalist world-system. It seems that said influences upon the university are much more powerful than the changes and transformations that HEIs can produce within themselves and in the society where they reside. Perhaps this is why a certain frustration exists, seeing that the impacts of policies with transformative desires (UNESCO Regional Conferences and World Conferences on Higher Education, 1998, 2009 and 2022) [7] are of little intensity. This leads us to ask ourselves: is a profound transformation of the university possible without previously transforming society?

References

1. Trindade H. As metáforas da crise: da universidade em ruínas às universidades na penumbra na América Latina". En: Gentili P, organizador. Universidades na penumbra. neoliberalismo e reestruturação universitária (pp. 13-43). São Paulo: Brasil: Cortez Editora y CLACSO; 2001.
2. Altbach P, Wit H de. Postpandemic outlook for higher education is bleakest for the poorest. *Int. High. Educ.* [internet]. 2020 [cited 2022 Dec. 7]; (102 Special Issue):3-5. Available in: <https://www.internationalhighereducation.net/api-v1/article/!/action/getPdfOfArticle/articleID/2904/productID/29/filename/article-id-2904.pdf>
3. Sousa Santos B. El rol de la universidad en la construcción de una globalización alternativa. In: Global University Network for Innovation, La educación superior en el mundo. Nuevos retos y roles emergentes para el desarrollo humano y social. Barcelona: Ediciones Mundi-Prensa [internet]; 2008. pp. 169-71 [cited 2022 Dec. 7]. Available in: <https://upcommons.upc.edu/handle/2099/7981>
4. Altbach P, Salmi J. The road to academic excellence. The making of world class research universities. Washington D. C.: The World Bank; 2011.
5. Grupo Banco Mundial. Gasto público en educación [internet]; 2022 [cited 2022 December]. Available in: <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS>
6. Clark B. Creando universidades emprendedoras en Europa. *Revista Valenciana d'Estudis Autonòmics* 1997;(21):373-92.
7. Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe. La educación transforma vidas [internet]; 2022 [cited December 2022]. Available in: <https://www.unesco.org/es/education>

