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DOCUMENTO  
DE TRABALHO  
03/94

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**WHAT IS CHANGING IN MEXICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN THE  
FACE OF RECENT POLICIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION?**

(Forthcoming in *Higher Education Policy*)

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# WHAT IS CHANGING IN MEXICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN THE FACE OF RECENT POLICIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION?

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Over the past three years higher education policy in Mexico has been going through important changes. After almost two decades of unregulated expansion, the higher education system is now faced with a set of policies that are modifying the basic funding mechanisms and have established evaluation as a new operating criterion aimed at raising the quality of research and teaching. This research paper examines two sets of relationships in which important changes are occurring and tries to determine the directions these changes are taking. The focus is on the relationships between the government ministry in charge of higher education and institutional authorities, and the relationships between institutional administrators and the academic communities. The central concern is: are the new evaluation policies implemented by the government effectively leading to quality betterment or rather to a reshuffling of power relationships that end up enhancing the position of administrative strata within institutions in detriment of academics?

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Governmental policy toward higher education in Mexico has gone through important changes between 1989 and 1994. During the crisis years of the 1980's the much heard lament was low salaries, restricted governmental funding, and loss of prestige of public universities. More recently, one hears government official, university rectors and department heads picking up on the optimistic chat of modernization which stresses raising quality, improving efficiency and above all making education more relevant to economic development.

In this paper, I shall look at some of the changes that are emerging in higher education, and I shall focus especially on the shifting nature of government-university relationships and some of its consequences for management and governance at the establishment level. This is a progress report on ongoing research by a group of Mexican Sociologists who are monitoring changes in higher education. Rather than a finished product, it is a discussion of some initial findings from several case studies that are currently underway (Kent, Moreno & De Vries, 1993; Hernández, 1993; Ibarra, 1993; Rodríguez, 1993; Ruiz, 1993) These studies are based on interviews, documentation and institutional statistics, and they are thought of as preparation in the development a more precise framework for looking at how academic structures, cultures and relationships are shifting under a new set o governmental policies.

The governmental rationale is that attention to educational quality has become the main objective for public policies. However, the basic contention in this paper is that these

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank David Post, Ricardo Moreno, Wietse de Vries and Dan Levy for their helpful comments on this paper.

policies are producing shifts in governance structures and management styles that do not necessarily lead to firm programs of quality betterment.

## **2. A brief outline of policy in the recent past**

The basic processes at work in the higher system in Mexico today must be understood against the backdrop of the changes that took place over the past two decades. We realize now that many of our fairly serious current problems grew out of rapid, unplanned expansion in the 1970's, when enrollment swelled from 200,000 students in 1970 to about one million in 1985. At present a national average of about 15% of the 20 to 24 year age group is enrolled in higher education, albeit in a context of great regional differences within the country itself. The *modern* areas of the country – the capital, the large cities and the industrialized northern region bordering on the United States – are virtually in a different world compared to the impoverished South. There are truly *many Mexicos*, and higher education has many different faces. The quality and availability of higher education vary accordingly.

In the prosperous 1970's, when the economy was stocked by high world prices for Mexico's petroleum, numerous public and private institutions were created: in 1970 there were 100 institutions, whereas today there are more than 370 institutions in operation. This expansion opened up higher education to people in the provinces and especially to young women. About 75% of enrollment expansion was absorbed by the public universities, some of which grew to unmanageable proportions and became centers of political conflict. This development affected their public image, undoubtedly contributing to the growth of the private sector in recent years (Kent, 1992; 1993). One important corollary of this growth was the improvised hiring of young academics needed to teach the growing numbers of students enrolled: national figures for academic posts went from under 20,000 in 1970 to about 100,000 in the mid-1980's. Since the postgraduate level was very small at that time, many of the people hired as university teachers lacked high level training. Another crucial element to be considered here is that as university organizations were subjected to extreme pressures of rapid growth and politicization, they mostly reacted with the traditionally unprofessional administrative cultures at their disposal, resulting in top-heavy, inefficient and politically fragmented bureaucratic structures and a low capacity to follow coherent development strategies (Brunner, 1991; Kent, 1990; Schwartzman, 1993)

The crisis years of the 1980's – the so called *lost decade* in Latin American economic development – brought to the surface some of the contradictions inherent in this process of unregulated expansion. The economic crisis and the government policies aimed at opening the economy and restricting the role of the public sector meant that funding for universities between 1983 and 1989 was severely restricted. Additionally, high inflation in the 1980's whittled away at academic salaries, reducing their real purchasing power by about 40% on the average. Although universities were not as hard hit as other areas of the public sector, which were actually closed down or sold off, this severe retrenchment had drastic effects on the institutional fabric and academic morale: whereas some leading scientists and academics left for greener pastures abroad, the majority of Mexican professors were forced into finding additional employment, and several institutions went into downward spirals of factionalist struggle over decreasing resources. This, evidently, did nothing to offset growing criticism of public universities and to stem the increasing flow of students toward private institutions.

Socially and culturally, the 1980's brought other transformations. First, the growth of student demand for higher education has slowed down (from 10% yearly in the 1970's to

about 1% yearly since 1986), and it has become more specific, more employment-oriented, and more diversified by social strata. The inertial quality of student demand in the expansive 1970's when higher education was seen as a *consumption good* has given way to the sense of education as an *investment*.

Criticism of massive public universities became common in the 1980's, and enrollments in the private sector expanded accordingly, at about 5% annually since the mid-1980's. This growing preference for private institutions, especially on the part of the upper social strata, has resulted in the privatization of the educational trajectories of economic and political elites: leaders in politics and business today have gone basically to private elementary and secondary schools, to elite private universities and from there perhaps to a graduate school in the United States or Europe. With some exceptions, public universities have been pushed off center stage in various crucial spheres of public decision making and private entrepreneurship. However, it must be pointed out that most scientific research is carried out in public universities, since private institutions have been mostly interested in training managers and engineers rather than producing new knowledge.

### **3. Changes in government policy toward higher education in the 1990's.**

The Salinas administration reached the presidency in 1988 armed with a distinct modernization discourse: it continued to diminish import tariffs, to reduce government presence in the economy, to dismantle traditional corporatist relationships within the ruling party and the state apparatus, to develop infrastructure, and to increase foreign investment. This government has also focused strongly on education at all levels, both by increasing funding in real terms and also by modifying the traditional *instrumentalist* stance in educational finance in favor of a *more selective* outlook. Thus, perhaps the most important element here is the government's intention to restructure its relationship with the educational system, apparently seeking to move from a *demand-led* to an *expenditure-led* approach.

Many measures have been effected in the higher education sector over the past four years. In order to give an orderly presentation of the most important policies, I shall list them in reference to the following basic issues that pertain to changes in the regulatory relationships between government and higher education institutions (Meek, Goedegebuure, Kivinen, and Rinne, 1991; Becher and Kogan, 1992):

- a. Diversification/homogenization of higher education institutions
- b. Academic roles and values: teaching and research
- c. Institutional autonomy
- d. Selection and assessment of students
- e. Institutional governance
- f. Funding
- g. Evaluation

- a. *Diversification*: The government has made it clear that it considers institutional diversification desirable:

- Eleven new *Technological Universities* have been created, offering two year postsecondary training closely linked to regional job markets and in close coordination with local business leaders. The experience of the French Institutes Universitaires de Technologie and the Community Colleges of the United States seem to have partially inspired policymakers in the effort.

b. *Academic roles and values:*

- Development of the teaching function is emphasized through the following programs: productivity grants to individual teachers based on evaluation scores from students and peers; curriculum evaluation and restructuring is being emphasized as a result of on-site visits by external peer review committees that were set up in 1991; and a teacher retraining program through the promotion of graduate studies was proposed in late 1993.
- Research has received far greater attention than teaching: funding has increased substantially; there is considerable rhetoric about developing applied research linked to industry (something that neither Mexican scientists nor businessmen are used to); and funding criteria have become increasingly selective with a focus on internationally competitive research projects (Alzati, 1991).

c. *Institutional autonomy*

Since autonomy is a jealously guarded value in public universities and is protected by the Constitution, federal policy makers have been careful not to talk about impinging on autonomy. But officials have been quick to point out that they have been able to implement rapid top-down curricular reforms in the Technological Institutes<sup>2</sup>, which are directly linked to the federal Secretary of Education (Zedillo, 1993), whereas at times they have expressed impatience with the slow response of autonomous universities. In fact, governments at the state level have in some cases adopted an active interventionist posture toward autonomous universities, by pushing the local legislature to change the university statutes even in the face of opposition by professors and students. It would seem then that autonomy is disregarded in certain cases where activist politicians feel strongly about their plans for modernization and where institutional leadership cannot or will not deflect outside intervention.

d. *Student selection and assessment*

- Discarding the traditional "open-door" admissions policy in most universities that was responsible for the great expansion of the 1970's, the government has insisted that entrance examinations be applied at all institutions. The College Entrance Examinations Board has been hired by several universities to develop these instruments, whereas other institutions have developed their own examinations.
- A series of tests for assessing minimum professional competence in graduates was introduced for discussion in 1993. It would be applicable initially to certain

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<sup>2</sup> Technological Institutes are four year institutions designed to train engineers and administrators and are centrally controlled by the federal government. They constitute a different sector from the recently created Technological Universities which offer two-year programs.

disciplines and professions, such as the health professions, engineering, and law. (ANUIES, 1993)

*e. Governance*

Policy makers have insisted that universities develop more efficient management and strategic decision making system based on the use of systematic information. Several institutions have modified their internal governance structures, reducing the influence of students and increasing that of academics and administrators. Greater accountability of the use of funds is also being stressed, although it would seem that university administrators are basically being made more accountable to government officials and not to the public at large. It would seem that the use of information is still very much a *private* matter within Mexican institutions and government offices.

*f. Funding*

- Government money for higher education has increased considerably over the past three years, although the real value of public funds in constant dollars has only recently recovered from the severe restrictions of the 1980's. The *incrementalist* and *benevolent* funding formula of the prosperous 1970's was modified in the mid-1980's and has been partially replaced by new formulas to finance research, innovative programs and individual productivity grants for teachers and researchers (Gago, 1992)
- Additionally, public institutions have been urged to expand their income from non-governmental sources by raising their traditionally nominal student fees, selling services and establishing contracts with local industry (Arredondo, 1992). This additional income accounts for about 10% to 15% of university budgets.

*g. Evaluation*

The government has set up a National Evaluation Commission for Higher Education, made up of public officials and rectors, in order to develop evaluation at the following levels:

- Institutional self-evaluation, which is performed by each establishment according to predesigned government criteria and is supposed to lead to a mission statement and a development strategy, which in turn is a prerequisite for applying for additional government funds applicable to specific innovations.
- External review of academic programs, which is carried out by several Peer Committees set up by the government. Their mission is to recommend changes to academic departments.
- Individual evaluation of professors and researchers: this is conducted at the department and establishment level and the results are used to administer individual performance grants.
- Evaluation of graduate programs is being performed by the National Council for Science and Technology, a federal agency run by government officials in close consultation with leading scientists. This process is based on performance indicators centered on the research productivity of the department's academics, which are

analyzed by peer committees. The results are used to formulate a list of so-called *programs of excellence* which are the eligible for research grants, scholarships and other financial assistance.

This extremely brief presentation of current policies is made with certain reservations in mind. In the first place, with respect to evaluation, especially institutional self-evaluation, various observers agree that in many cases it has been reduced to a bureaucratic game between federal officials and university authorities. The latter rarely involve the academic communities in institutional evaluations, whereas the former state that they do not use the results of evaluations as inputs for funding decisions. The results of both institutional evaluations and peer review reports are not made public, thus weakening the *assurance* function of evaluation policies.

#### **4. How are universities responding?**

From the vantage point of an outsider, these policies would probably not constitute a radical departure from previous times. However, for a higher education system that evolved under a lax regime of political regulation underpinned by a welfare ideology, they represent important changes in several respects. They certainly point to a change in the *culture* of the system at the government level. Whether or not cultural changes are actually occurring at the department and the individual operating level of each institution is a question that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Although, all the rhetoric about evaluation and economic relevance is not totally borne out by the actual operation of government programs, it would seem that federal officials are playing an increasing role in *managing* the public higher education system by means of funding *inducements* and specific policy recommendations. Increasing governmental scrutiny (and, some would say, intervention) of the two public sectors (universities and technological institutes) stands in evident contrast to its *laissez faire* attitude toward the operation of the growing private sector.

Now I would like to point to a number of changes that are emerging in the relationships between public universities and the government and in institutional governance. The following diagram shows a global map of some of these changes.

## Changes in the dominant relationships and values among basic actors in higher education

1970's to 1980's	1990's
<i>Rectors</i> as coalition chieftains & power-brokers	<i>Rectors</i> as managers, aided by expert staff, interested in stability, competition for funds & public respect.
<i>Unions</i> mobilized for wage raises & influence	<i>Leading scientists and academics</i> : participating in evaluations, funding decisions & development strategies.
<i>Student groups</i> demanding free access & influence.	<i>Individual students</i> as clients investors, interested in jobs.
<i>Political parties</i> mobilized within universities, the only politically liberal zones of an authoritarian political system.	<i>Businesspeople &amp; donors</i> : interested in making decisions & developing projects with universities.
<i>Federal Government</i> as "benevolent" founder & seeker of political stability.	<i>Federal &amp; state governments</i> : selective funders & (discursively) guardians of quality and efficiency.
<i>Association of Rectors</i> as political buffer for resolving major conflicts & as formal vehicle for legitimizing government plans.	<i>Association of Rectors</i> : still a legitimating buffer, but now pushing for participation in designing evaluation policies, trying not to lose political influence.
<b>Demand-led expansion: regulation by political relationships and entitlement pressures</b>	<b>Expenditure-led policies: regulation by incentives to adopt government policies</b>

There are new actors and new values on stage whose interaction with some of the actors and cultures of the previous period is not always smooth. Most active in this new context is the government, which has made it clear what specific changes it wants institutions to adopt, although long-range objectives for the higher education system as a whole have not been made clear.

Power shifts at the national level and decreasing legitimacy of universities in the wake of the 1980's crisis have enabled the government to move toward closer regulation of the basic variables of the higher education system. The Undersecretary for Higher Education has asserted that the government has abandoned its old role as a mere *funding agency* and wants to operate now as a *guardian of quality and relevance* (Gago, 1992). The old focus on growth and political stability has given way to a new interest in efficiency and adoption of federal programs. This is not a radical shift away from a political form of regulation, since the federal government is still the major source of funds for higher education and it uses this *power of the purse* accordingly.

It is surprising to some observers of the higher education scene that this change in outlook and government strategy has occupied center stage fairly quickly. The emergence of a new set of issues and policies occurred with the government taking the initiative from the beginning of the 1990's and using financial incentives to soften the establishment of a new form of discourse.

From our study, it would seem that rectors have adopted the ideology of modernization partly because it was costly not to do so and partly because the traditional institutional coalitions – some of which express opposition to this new policy – have lost

ground over the recent years. In some cases, this process has endowed the role of rector with newfound powers and forms of influence within his or her own establishment. The figure of *manager* or *entrepreneur* is emerging, as rectors don the clothing of the modernizer. The case studies of four universities mentioned above have shown clearly that institutional leadership has played an important part in the manner in which different universities have responded to the new policies. The institutions being studied<sup>3</sup> have been especially quick to adopt and implement government programs, although each one of them has focused on different priorities and has followed different routes. The following table shows out as examples of early and – according to the government – *successful implementation* of federal programs. Some of them also exemplify important shifts in institutional leadership and ideology, and all of them have received financial assistance from the government in response to the measures they have carried out. They are by no means the only institutions that have experienced this type of changes and are used here only to point to the importance of the role of institutional leadership in policy change. Something else that should be pointed out is that the focus here is on the *most visible* initial products of policy change.

#### **How different types of institutional leadership respond to government policy**

<b>Strong Internal Academic Leadership with Government Backing</b>	<b>Strong International Political Leadership with Government Backing</b>	<b>External Coalition of Government &amp; Business Leaders vs Weak Internal Leadership</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Smooth transition to new policies</li> <li>- Clear move towards research university;</li> <li>- Pay increases for high performing academics;</li> <li>- Close links with local business;</li> <li>- Participatory evaluation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflict: successful confrontation with internal coalition;</li> <li>- Rigorous entrance exam to reduce student numbers;</li> <li>- Increase in students fees</li> <li>- Top down managerial style</li> <li>- Support for research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflict: local government intervenes to restructure university</li> <li>- More power to administrators.</li> <li>- Creates a Board of Trustees.</li> <li>- Transforms Faculties into Departments.</li> <li>- Reduces union prerogatives, defeats student opposition.</li> </ul>

## **5. Conclusions**

One conclusion, then, is that the type of prevailing institutional leadership plays an important role in the way each university is responding to current policies. Initiative by the rectors seems to be an important factor. But different directions are taken depending on various ingredients:

- The existence of an organized internal coalition of union officials, student leaders and university politicians may mean strong opposition to these policies, and they do not go away without a fight. A probable outcome of a successful struggle against such opposition is strong managerialist style of governance with feeble collegial elements.
- The existence of a strong and organized academic and/or political community within the establishment will mean pressure to moderate managerialism and to develop new policies along collegial lines, pushing for greater academic participation in evaluation and funding decisions.

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<sup>3</sup> The studies cover the following institutions: the Autonomous Metropolitan University in Mexico City, the University of Puebla, the University of Guadalajara and the University of Sonora. They include two of the largest and one of the leading public universities.

- The absence of a strong academic and/or political community within the university may (or may not) lead external coalitions of business people and politicians to intervene to restructure the university if it is sufficiently important for them. A strong managerial style is bound to emerge.

Universities whose rectors take the initiative in adopting government policies meet with a positive response in the government and in the local political and business communities, but they may face internal strife. This is a result of the fact that a *managerialist style* in Mexican universities is not conceived in terms of the collaborative entrepreneurial ideology of contemporary quality management (Dill, 1992), but rather in terms of a clannish and sometimes slightly despotic style of direct control not devoid of patrimonialist tendencies (Ouchi, 1980).

Thus, it is useful to look at the higher education system in Mexico as a complex political system whose actors, values and rules of operation are going through important changes. University politics today seems to center more on figures such as rectors, department heads, policy consultants, researchers, businessmen and government officials. Being pushed off to the sidelines are union leaders, student activists, and the *lower clergy* of Mexican academia. In this changing arena, rectors are discovering that the so-called modernization of higher education brings power shifts that enhance their positions.

A related conclusion is that the emerging relationship between government and public universities in Mexico may be explained in terms of *inducement strategies* followed by the government. According to W. R. Scott's contention,

Many organizational fields do not contain agents having power and/or authority to impose their own structural definitions on local organizational forms. But they may be in a position to provide strong inducements for organizations that conform to their wishes... Inducement strategies create structural changes in [such] organizations. Typically, the funding agency specifies eligibility conditions: conditions for receiving funds...The recipient organization must usually provide detailed evidence concerning continuing structural or procedural conformity to requirements – accounts of who performed the work, how the work was performed, on whom the work was performed – in the form of periodic reports. Complex accounting and control systems are employed because more straightforward command-and-compliance authority is lacking... Inducement strategies create increased organizational isomorphism (structural similarity), but more so at the intermediate than the operative organizational level... The funding agent's distinctive purposes are more likely to be reflected in the preparation of organizational accounts – both fiscal and retrospective reporting – than in the performance of workers. An additional explanation of the weakness of inducement strategies is suggested by the social psychological literature that reports that participant's internal motivation and commitment is weakened, no reinforced, by receipt of external incentives. (Scott 1991)

Scott's argument certainly seems to apply in Mexican universities where the most visible changes constitute modifications in the structure and styles of the management level of institutions. However, there is not strong evidence of the establishment of a *quality culture*. Whether these developments will lead to bettering the quality and the effectiveness of higher education is a question that must be answered by further research on the consequences of these process for the private domains of the department and the classroom.

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