

UNIVERSITIES AND THE NEW STUDENT PROFILE: NEW REALITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR LATIN AMERICA

Access to higher education is considered as an indisputable characteristic of modern societies. Both developed and emergent countries have expanded their higher education systems, increasing the amounts of registered students as well as the quantity of institutions. This situation has deepened due to processes of general impact such as the evolution of societies towards an economy based on knowledge and globalization, where deep changes that necessarily require of the functions and characteristics typical of educational systems have been generated.

The relevance of higher education systems in the current context is not limited to the effect that they generate within the countries, where the evolution of society not only makes knowledge a strategic factor for development, but also has highlighted the impact of higher education on the lives of individuals. Obtaining an academic degree generates individual economic revenues, acquiring relevance the positive externalities in the private sphere as well. Therefore, the access to higher education can be considered as a natural step in the training process of an individual, where it also turns out to be crucial in order to attain social mobility. More so, when it is considered that the increase in coverage of secondary education in emerging countries has succeeded to approximate the rate reached in developed nations, thus increasing the number of youth that are today in conditions to gain admission to higher education.

The expansion and massiveness of higher education has entailed an increase in the number of youth that gain access to it, in contrast to what took place decades ago, when it was characterized by being rather elitist and only a reduced part of the population was able to be admitted and obtain academic degrees. According to the World Bank, the most vulnerable 50% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean represented 16% of the higher education students in 2000, a figure that increased to 25% in 2013.

In addition to a larger number of registered students, there is a diversification in the characteristics of the youth entering the university, a new profile being placed into shape. Those

who presently enter higher education have, besides their merits and abilities, peculiarities that oftentimes turn difficult their passage through the university. Among those stand out: to come from disadvantaged social groups, to be the first generation to gain access to higher education, to have a low cultural, social and economic capital and, to have an often deficient secondary training. The foregoing implies a challenge to university institutions, which must face it, whatever the country where they are located, by designing actions that allow the students to finish successfully their careers, since due to their characteristics there is a larger risk of failing to complete their training.

Research in higher education, referred to this student profile reveals the importance of the fact that institutions adjust their resources and capacities to the new scenario. In this sense, to assure success in the middle and long term it is not enough to design and implement new actions and programs that allow to take care of the characteristics of the students of the new millennium. It is necessary to take bigger steps ahead, institutionalizing such actions by incorporating them to the strategic development plans.

In consequence, research is needed to provide new ways to look at the processes that occur within the universities so as to adjust the current scenario. In this sense, to socialize the good practices implemented that have permitted a good academic performance of these students can be a success in the logic of the knowledge society. In this way, Latin American universities could be able, based on the organizational learning recovered through research, to implement measures that can contribute to students being able to obtain their academic degrees and successfully incorporate themselves to the labor market.

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