QUALITY AND EQUITY: STRATEGIC CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Higher education (HE) has experienced a very significant growth in Latin America in recent decades. From 1990 to this day the number of students has increased from less than 7 million to close to 25 million. This means that from a gross enrollment rate slightly above 20%, a gross weighted average enrollment rate higher than 54% has been reached. Also, in all the countries of the region women's participation is equal or higher than that of men.

These numbers are the expression of public policies of expansion and massification of HE, policies that go hand in hand with a growing concern for the quality of the training of advanced human capital. This has led, in the region, to the establishment of quality assurance systems together with the design of evaluation and quality assessment systems of the institutions and their programs, both undergraduate and graduate.

Notwithstanding, it should be considered that while access has increased, it is estimated that half of the students do not complete their programs of study. A deeper inspection suggests that the majority of those who do not finish their studies correspond to students that are economically and socially more vulnerable. Also, students in more vulnerable groups that succeed to complete their careers reach less favorable positions in the labor market than their peers with a higher socio-economic level.

At this point, equity in HE constitutes an inescapable strategic challenge for Latin America. Equity, in turn, implies the generation of conditions of equality of opportunities in access, in the formative processes, in the results of education, and in the ulterior professional or technical insertion.

While equity in access has improved significantly, highly significant differences remain in the proportion of students of higher socioeconomic levels that reach HE as compared to the lower levels. The participation gap between the quintiles of higher and lower income reaches 35 percentage points across Latin America. In 12 countries of the region less than 15% of the youth in the poorest quintile are in HE and in no country the indicator reaches above 30%.

It should be noted, in this context, that the utilization of standardized tests for admission into HE is plausible inasmuch as they are combined with other academic antecedents, such as the relative position of the student grades in high school. Otherwise, there is the risk that the best students of more vulnerable schools have worse results in admission than average pupils from economically and socially more privileged schools.

However, this is not enough. The educational processes should warrant equity levels that imply, among other elements, to identify and provide systematic help, permanent and uninterrupted, to students who show lagging performance in a given subject. Furthermore, answers are required to face the diversity of students by making institutional efforts for their successful incorporation into the formative processes, which must be complemented by strengthening the resources and the infrastructure and equipment conditions, as well as making teachers aware of their roles as educators, and not only as evaluators.

In a similar manner, the results of the training process should warrant, besides equivalent levels of knowledge, the social abilities, communication and enterprising capacities, and other 21st century competencies, so as to favor the opportunities of the graduates in the labor market or to provide the basic knowledge and capacities needed for individual or collective undertakings.

Due to an imperative of educational justice, the goal of educational equity in HE should be incorporated in the systems of quality evaluation, as it is not possible to contend that high quality levels can be achieved in institutions unconcerned about equity in the access, in the processes and in the results.

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