

PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AND REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

While Chilean public higher education and the state institutions within it have the largest demand in the system, particularly due to gratuity, quality and public value, its institutions' participation is minority. State universities comprise 27% of university enrollment. Together with the private universities of the Council of Rectors, historically considered as public institutions for all State effects, the public sector corresponds to 48%. Therefore, the strengthening of public higher education, as sought in the new Chilean legislation in this realm, aims to generalize certain attributes (mainly in matters of complexity, quality and self-regulation) that are not exclusive of public institutions. The problem that is posed to regional public universities in this context is summarized in the difficulty to make visible the specific contribution that is made from the territories to public higher education and, thus, to the development of the country. Inasmuch public regional universities, including traditional state and private establishments, amount to one third of the university enrollment, the problem becomes one of centralization that moves these institutions to a secondary place in the development of the system.

The knowledge society takes place with the massification of higher education available to the masses and the mobilization of autonomous knowledge in the productive process. In this sense, inequalities in that society are also educational inequalities, among which is included the centralism of the system, as a restriction to balanced development.

The regional public universities make specific contributions that must be appreciated. Together with the training of professionals locally required, they provide 45% of the Chilean scientific output. Also, the systematic connection with local actors and organizations has an impact on the cultural, productive, social and political-administrative development of the respective territories.

The contribution of regional public universities is synthesized in the pertinence, explicitly committed to the goals of regional development in declarations of institutional mission and vision. However, as these incorporate the problems and challenges of the territory in disadvantageous conditions with respect to the center (in terms of access to resources and selectivity of recruitment), the inequalities of the system are reproduced.

The new legal framework of Chilean higher education aims to compensate for these inequalities, recognizing the role of regional public universities. However, through the intensification of the market regulation mechanisms and the allocation of resources via voucher to the students, it becomes more difficult to escape the 'Mathew Effect' installed in higher education. At any rate, the new requirements of integral accreditation make the model of the university for profit and with low quality less probable every time. By the same token, it can be expected that the new research capacities progressively developed within this framework also reach the regions. The orientation towards standards of excellence is also contemplated for a balanced improvement of the state subsystem. The problem, however, remains to the measure that specific contributions are not made visible and the increase of regional state higher education financing is not proportional to the burden that the new legal frameworks impose.

The challenge for regional public universities will be to continue performing teaching, research and extension, with quality and pertinence to the necessities of the context where they are inserted. This, within a new framework that adds administrative and financial burdens without specifying the targets of public education. Overcoming the centralism of higher education is considered, in principle, as the task that regional universities assume by representing and giving value to the public contribution that they perform. For instance, the need of timely graduation that stems from gratuity is more difficult to fulfill in less selective institutions, requiring more resources and capacities to sustain quality results. To the validation of teaching and research quality at national and international levels of excellence, the orientations towards regional pertinence are added. The contribution to regional development should be evaluated in its effective magnitude, considering the resources and work incorporated as well as the transformations produced, so that public education in the regions receives real recognition within the regulatory and competition parameters of the system.

ARTURO FLORES FRANULIĆ AND NICOLAS FLEET OYARCE
Universidad de Tarapacá, Chile