

No Fees to Enroll Them All? The State of College Access in Mexico

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Introduction

Mexico is often portrayed as a colorful country through its art, clothing, architecture and landscapes; but all that color carries in itself contrast. Education, as well as other aspects of public life in Mexico, has been a matter of contrasts since the settlement of the first civilizations. Both the Mayas and the Aztecs were advanced in architecture, sculpture, mathematics and astronomy but established highly stratified cities including political systems that distinguished among the different social classes for access to education and the professions people could exercise (Fagg 1969). The first Western schooling systems in Mexico came when the Spanish conquerors took the city of Tenochtitlan in 1521 and Spain set the goal “to educate and to Christianize the diverse indigenous groups” (Osborn 1976, 6). To achieve this goal the Catholic Church, through the Franciscan order, established in 1523 the first school: San José de Belén de los Naturales. The fact that education was first entrusted to the church, had since its origins, the issue of making it controlled, paternalistic and stratified. About a decade later, in 1536, the Spanish Crown accepted a petition from the bishop appointed to Mexico to found what would become “the first institution of higher learning in the New World: Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco” (Osborn 1976, 7). Since then, and until its 1910 revolution, education in Mexico remained somewhat restricted to the large urban areas and to the middle-upper classes.

At the beginning of the modern era, as a result of the reform laws and with the promulgation of the 1917 Constitution, education began to grow exponentially as a public good that has remained compulsory (only from K-12), secular, and free for all (MX. Const. 2019). But this exponential growth, 1) has not been enough to guarantee high levels of education for most of the population, 2) has resulted in a highly stratified system, and 3) has brought along some serious issues regarding the quality of education. Specifically in the tertiary level, and to address the issue of access, the federal government proposed and, their majority in Congress recently passed, a new constitutional reform to also include higher education among the compulsory levels of education (MX. Const. 2019). By making higher education a right for every Mexican citizen, the government will be forced to guarantee access regardless of a student’s financial means or academic standing.

This article represents a policy analysis of this new legislation and a reflection on whether or not making higher education compulsory is the best route to increase enrollment and coverage. The article is organized as a holistic analysis of higher education in Mexico and it challenges with a focus on access and coverage. The manifold issues of the current status and policies are described first. The article then moves to a discussion about how, by merely changing the legislation, the country might not see the expected outcomes. It also discusses how, considering the high cost associated with implementing such policy, there might be other priorities to attend to. It ends with research and policy recommendations focused on increasing access and coverage without neglecting issues of equity and quality.

Educational System in Contemporary Mexico

Given its nature, education has been traditionally built from the bottom up, there is not much sense in investing largely in higher education without first having a large proportion of the population getting through primary and secondary education. Besides, having a majority of the population being literate, and with at least secondary education, benefits a country's development. As explained by Katarina Keller (2006), "enrollment rates in primary and secondary education, demonstrates important indirect effects by benefiting other development goals affecting per capita growth" (p. 29). This was the case in Mexico, where a large proportion of the public funds spent in education during the last century were allocated towards these levels. Even funding from multilateral organizations like the World Bank have been received in Mexico but the vast majority of those have been spent in projects in the lower levels of education (Maldonado-Maldonado 2006). With these investments, the country was able to secure an almost universal enrollment in primary education in 2010 (Ordorika and Rodríguez-Gómez 2012). However, the problem with focusing mainly in coverage and access is that there is less accountability for the outcomes both in terms of competencies and completion. For instance, the OECD predicts that only 47 percent of today's young people in Mexico will complete upper secondary education in their lifetime and merely 22 percent will complete tertiary education (OECD 2015). Even after 2012 when upper-secondary education became compulsory, graduation rates from this and previous levels haven't increased significantly (OECD 2018b).

Tertiary (Higher) Education

According to the National Ministry of Education (SEP), as of 2018-2019 Mexican higher education ecosystem is comprised of 7,369 school-sites where 3,943,544 students are enrolled and receiving their education from 414,408 teachers (SEP 2019b). The ministry classifies higher education institutions (HEIs) in twelve types: 1) CONACYT research centers and decentralized research centers, 2) decentralized technological institutes, 3) federal technological institutes, 4) public teacher's colleges, 5) private institutions, 6) intercultural universities, 7) polytechnic universities, 8) state public universities, 9) public state institutions with solidary support, 10) federal public universities, 11) technological universities, and 12) other public HEIs. Despite the various types and large number of institutions, enrollment is highly concentrated in a few hundred state public universities and private institutions (ANUIES 2019).

Even with such a large system, access to higher education in Mexico is among the lowest for other OECD countries, 38.4 percent of the college-age population (OECD 2018a). The consequences of this poor coverage in higher education is worrying because it inhibits the possibility of more young people moving up the ladder of social class that eventually helps to stretch the huge gap in income that prevails in the country (Miramontes-Arteaga, Ocegueda, and Moctezuma-Hernández 2014). Several reasons explain how the country has managed to put itself in this position. Among the most important reasons are: a) social inequality between the population; b) the overall cost of education; c) quality of the institutions of higher education; and d) attainment of higher education credential not necessarily valued as useful for social mobility.

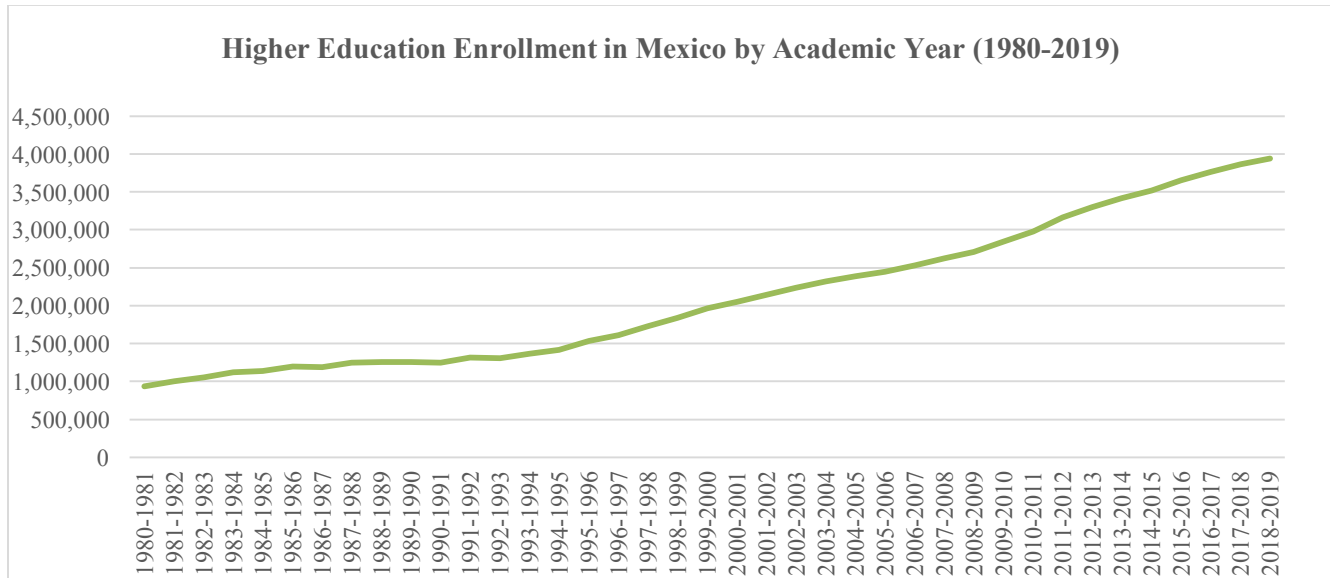
Social Inequality and Other Economic Factors.

Much lower than other OECD countries, in Mexico the average household net-adjusted disposable income per capita is \$16,310 USD. However, the differences in this indicator at the top and bottom 10 percent are remarkably high \$44,037 vs \$6,524 (OECD 2019a). Besides, over 46 percent of the population in Mexico lives below the national poverty line (Central Intelligence Agency 2018). So, if families are struggling to survive, higher education becomes a luxury they cannot afford, both in terms of the costs involved in education, and especially, the opportunity cost of not being able to generate a larger income.

While access to education in Mexico has been improving considerably in general (Figure 1), there is one group who has not benefitted by the changes to policy: the poorest strata of the society. Overall, around 38 percent of the young people in the age range between 18 and 22 years in Mexico are enrolled in tertiary education in Mexico (SEP 2017). However, among the subgroup of urban families with middle to high income, 45 percent of the population within that age range were enrolled in tertiary education vs 11 percent of the poorest population in the urban areas and 3 percent of the rural youth (Miller-Flores 2009). The contrast is huge and unfortunately not very uncommon in other

Latin American countries. Scholars from the region constantly study this vicious cycle of absence from education among the families in poverty reinforcing their lack of opportunities and their lower socio-economic status (SES) as one of their biggest obstacles to access education (Lodoño 1998).

Figure 1: Higher education in Mexico: Historical enrollment growth 1980 to 2019



Source: Undersecretary of Higher Education – National Ministry of Education.

As stated earlier, education from K-12 has been both compulsory and free in Mexico, but higher education has only recently been made compulsory and is not quite “free”. Public institutions of higher education rely almost solely on public funds and student fees since tuition is set very low. Top ranked public universities will charge their students a combined tuition and mandatory fees in a total that ranges between USD \$1 and \$50 per term. An important consideration is that education in Mexico is mostly non-residential, so students have to find and pay their own housing and other living expenses. The latter represents an important obstacle for those students from lower SES who would like to move to an urban area and enroll at a university instead of another type of HEI closer to their community. And since universities are not generating enough funds by themselves through tuition, the available aid for students tends to be low, thus creating large contrasts between social classes among students enrolled at different type of institutions.

To counteract this phenomenon, the government has been relying on a national grant system known as PRONABES (*Programa Nacional de Becas* or the National Scholarship Program). These grants are intended to help low SES students enrolled at a public HEI with their living expenses. The program considers several distinctions. In order to promote retention, students receive more funding each year as long as they continue to advance towards their degree (MXN \$750 monthly during the first year, \$830 2nd year, \$920 3rd year, and \$1,000 for the 4th and 5th year). Once students receive this grant, they automatically can apply to another one that covers local public transportation. As a way of promoting equity, priority some students are given priority such as those who are part of the national registry of victims, pregnant women, single parents, students with disabilities, among others (SEP 2015). Perhaps the most innovative component of this program is the fact that it forces both the recipients and the institutions to attend/provide specific follow-up sessions with a counselor or tutor to provide support and prevent attrition. Although there are slight variations by State, the overall intention of these programs is to help lower attrition rates due to financial constraints. However, these programs are not necessarily effective in providing access to a HEI for historically under-represented students. While it is true that the lived experiences of these students who end up attending a HEI serve as an incredible asset for persistence (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Rios-Aguilar et al. 2011), especially when accompanied with

the much-needed financial support, it is also true that students with less cultural and relational capital will struggle navigating through the processes of institutional admission and of application to these and other grants (Walpole 2005; DeHoyos, Attanasio, and Meghir 2019).

The current federal Government is reshaping these programs and moving towards universal stipends which will be centrally controlled and given directly to the students. One of them will be linked with practical and professional training, and another one will be a stipend to all students enrolled at the newly created “universidades para el bienestar” (welfare universities). Both programs are explained and later in this article.

Quality of Higher Education

Education is a complex issue because governments must not only ensure access for everyone, but *quality access* for everyone. Between 1990 and 2018, the number of higher education institutions in Mexico grew 236 percent with notable differences between the public and private sectors. While the growth in the public sector was of 119 percent, the number of institutions in the private sector more than four-folded (472 percent) (SEP 2019c). After this kind of exponential growth, it is quite understandable that concerns about quality arise.

In Mexico, there is a national council for accreditations (called COPAES) which is the only instance authorized by the national Ministry of Education (SEP) to recognize non-governmental organizations that can accredit programs of higher education. In 2019, the accreditation agencies in Mexico reported 3,990 accredited programs out of the more than 20,000 that are registered at SEP (COPAES 2019). This represents 14 percent of the total number of programs. In terms of students, SEP statistics show that only 55.2 percent of all the students enrolled in higher education, are seeking a degree in one of those programs (SEP 2019a). In sum, not only over 2/3 of the population that should be enrolled in higher education is not, but half of the students who are actually enrolled are so in a non-accredited program. This kind of data helps to understand why even if the government says that available spaces is not (or will not be) the issue, what the public actually perceives is that the number of “quality spaces” is very limited, thus, concentrating most of the demand in just a handful of the most renown state universities, the large national systems and the more prestigious private universities. To further illustrate this point, the 195 HEIs affiliated to the Mexican National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES) enroll 50 percent of higher education students in the country (ANUIES 2019).

Employment

It is not uncommon to attribute the need for higher education as a mean to social mobility. Enrolling in a HEI and earning a technical, vocational, professional or bachelor’s degree is seen as crucial to gain the required knowledge for a better job, with higher salaries (Heller 2013). Even though it is hard to debate this idea, there are some indications that point towards a different story, at least in the case of Mexico. The economy in the country is becoming more sophisticated; innovation in science and technology is responsible for the accelerated growth and the high hopes of international experts (Friedman 2013; PWC 2015). But still, the vast majority of the labor market does not require highly qualified employees. Compared to its other OECD peers, Mexico ranks high among the countries in terms of the percentage of the employed population with less than upper secondary education (64 percent in Mexico vs 55 percent average OECD). On the other hand, the country ranks low among others in terms of the percentage of the population with tertiary education who are employed (74 percent Mexico vs 80 percent average OECD) (OECD 2015). The fact that not many among the employed population are highly skilled (at least not through formal education), and that a fourth of the skilled labor is not employed, suggests that many people in Mexico do not perceive value in finishing a technical or bachelor’s degree. This might also suggest a misalignment between higher education offerings and the needs of the economy.

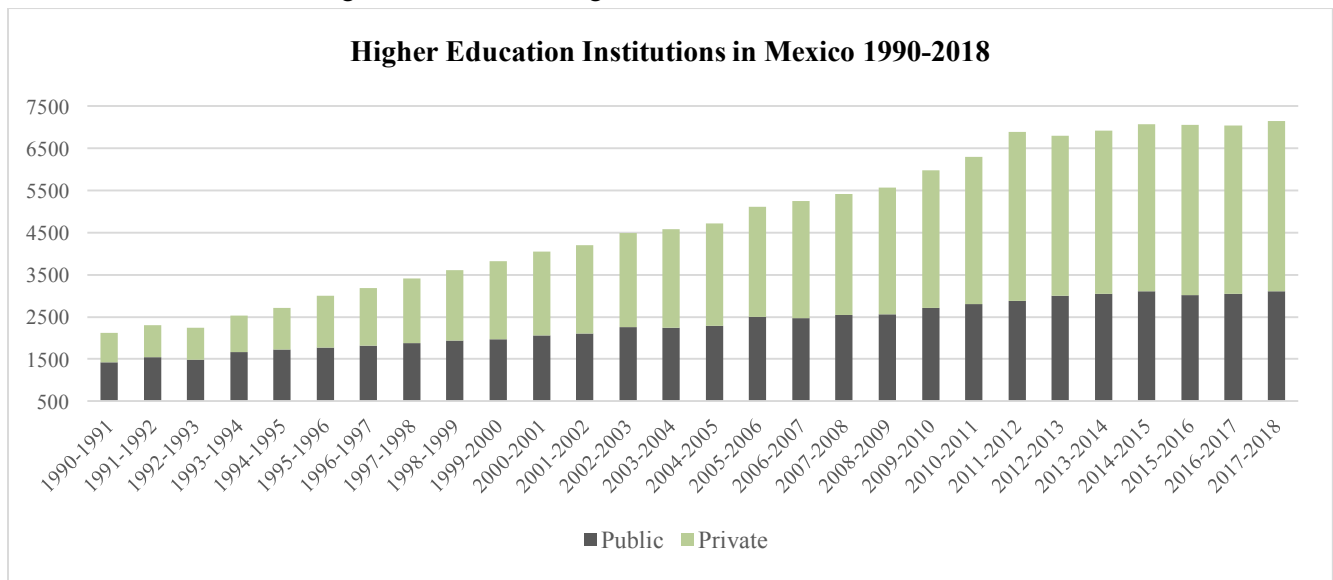
Special attention should also be placed to a somewhat more recent phenomenon that keeps growing: the so called ‘NINIs’ (or NEETs) people between 20-24 years who are not in employment, education, or training). In Mexico almost 24 percent of the population between 20-24 years are neither employed nor in education or training (OECD 2019b). Once again, contrasts are present, in this case gender: 9.2 percent among the men in the age group are ‘NINIs’ as

opposed to 36.6 percent among the women in the same age group. Given that most ‘NINIs’ already dropped out of secondary or tertiary education, their return to and successful completion of higher education has proven to be very unlikely (DeHoyos, Rogers, and Székely 2016).

Private Higher Education

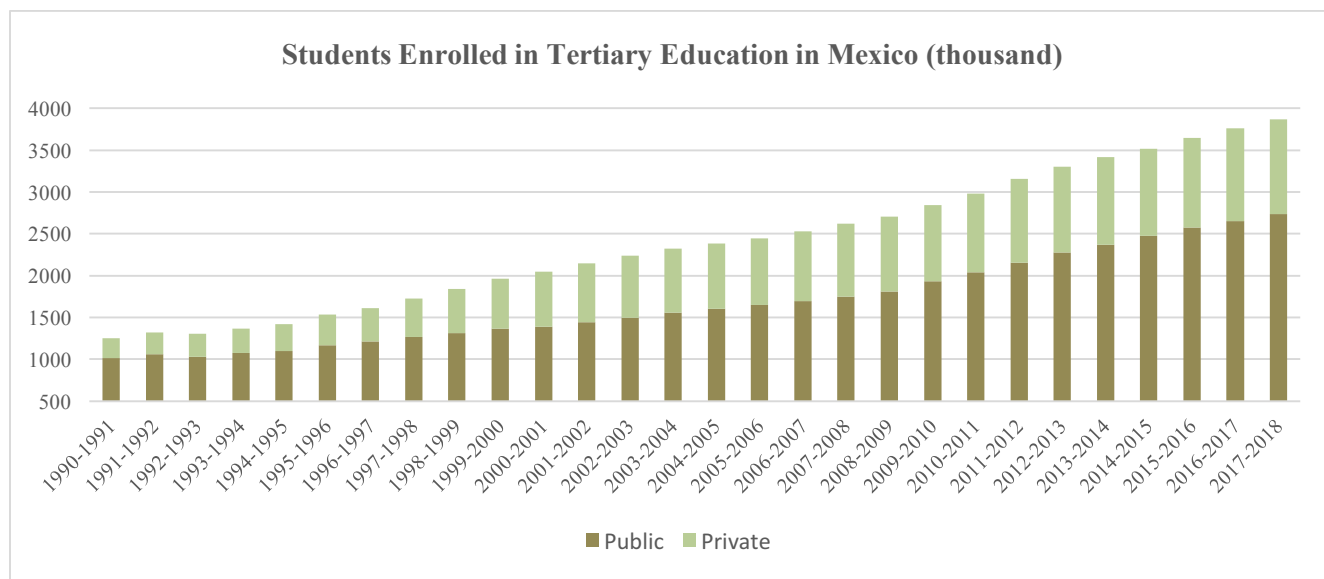
To alleviate the cost of education for the government, many countries have relied on deregulating the market for private education. In Mexico, the private sector of education has been growing exponentially. Since 2003 (see figure 2), there are more private than public institutions of higher education, currently 4,038 of the former and 3,102 of the latter. However, the private sector still lags way behind the public sector in terms of enrollment (2’739,583 vs 1’132,378) as shown in figure 3. Interestingly, since 2003, the average number of students per HEI at private institutions has declined 14 percent while this ratio at public institutions has increased 27 percent. This suggests that even when the market has grown in terms of options, the students continue to pursue public higher education in a greater proportion.

Figure 2: Number of higher education institutions in Mexico



Source: Historic and forecasted series of the statistics of the national education system (SEP 2019c)

Figure 3: Students enrolled in tertiary education in Mexico



Source: Historic and forecasted series of the statistics of the national education system (SEP 2019c)

The public vs private education debate in Mexico is a long-standing one (Alvarado-Lagunas, Luyando-Cuevas, and Picazzo-Palencia 2015; Suárez Zozaya 2012) but it should not be a binary. As eloquently stated by the Mexican intellectual Carlos Fuentes, there is room for both public and private education to coexist and be organized by the civil society:

Education, all over the world, needs public programs in order to survive. Without them, the explosion of demand may lead to a substandard market of low-quality education for the population at large and high profits for enterprising businessmen. We must defend public education. But public education requires cooperation from the private sector... It is a question...of giving both the public and the private sector their respective roles as well as very specific functions in the educational process—and not by demonizing one or the other—but by holding both sectors accountable to the social needs of the collective in question and embodied by the third sector, civil society. (Fuentes 2005, 70)

However, in Mexico, as in the case of most of Latin American countries, the civil society driven by neoliberal and capitalistic market laws, has transformed the market of higher education into a very stratified one regarding social class. Although the majority of private HEIs in Mexico are not-for-profit, social class reproduction has been exacerbated due to the abysmal differences in cost of attending a public or an elite private institution, and the social status conferred by being associated with the latter. As previously described, cost of tuition and fees at the most prestigious public institutions is very low, on the other hand, the cost for attending an elite private university in Mexico is very high. A comparison of the cost in terms of the daily minimum wage can help to better illustrate yet another huge contrast: While an individual would need to invest approximately less than a week of minimum wage income to cover the yearly tuition and fees at one of the most prestigious public universities, in the case of the top five private ones the investment would be of around 250 days of minimum wage income to cover the monthly tuition and fees. The large difference in pricing, has made elite private institutions affordable only for a small percentage of the population. Therefore, these institutions have the capacity to invest considerable resources to build modern campuses and attract talented faculty through more competitive wages. These institutions have been instrumental in “promoting, reproducing and even expanding the cultural capital gap” (Estrada Peredo, Ortega, and Gil-Antón 2007, 3) among the Mexican society. Relational capital should also be added to the former list which enhances the students at these institutions’ chances to move up the social ladder. Another contrasting fact can be used to exemplify this: 77 percent of

the CEO's from the companies listed in the Mexican Stock Exchange Market are alumnus from 3 of the top 5 private institutions (Sánchez 2015). Going back to Fuentes, without demonizing one or the other model, the reality is that the country needs to have more available spaces at its top institutions regardless of their funding. Socially, the country also needs to reduce the ever-growing inequality gap by providing equal opportunities to the young population irrespective of their SES.

Moving Forward with Compulsory Higher Education

The facts highlighted above help showcase the current state of affairs of higher education in Mexico. By portraying those issues, I argue that access and coverage, while undoubtedly very important, are neither the only nor the main problems that need to be addressed through an education reform. The constitutional reform pushed by the current administration seems to be based only in the responsibility of the state in guaranteeing access to higher education. The main components of the new education reform that pertain to higher education are: 1) adding higher education to the other levels defined in the Constitution as secular, free, and compulsory; 2) opening 100 new 'universities'; and 3) expanding direct aid to students in the form of stipends. Implications for each strategy are discussed next.

Compulsory and Free Education

Adding higher education as compulsory basically means that the State will be responsible to guarantee access for every individual irrespective of their SES or qualifications (as long as they have completed upper secondary education). Besides being compulsory, the Constitution explicitly states education should be free. This 'free' education will not be free, free education actually cost a lot (de Gayardon 2019). As we have seen from examples in the Nordic countries and elsewhere, free education requires a large investment of resources by the Government. In the case of Mexico, experts estimate that the proposed plan of compulsory education would cost the Federal Government yearly between 5,500 and 11,500 MXN Million on top on the regular budget allocated to higher education (Tuirán 2019; CEEY 2019). It is still unclear whether that investment would be worth it to alleviate some of the issues previously described, particularly the gap in access for those who have been left behind due to their SES, language barriers, and ethnic and cultural affiliations. Universal measures such as these have a huge potential of exacerbating the social gap.

Under the current public education ecosystem in Mexico, making higher education compulsory and completely free brings another important concern related to the possibility of jeopardizing institutional autonomy (Moreno 2019). The Government can declare guaranteed access to higher education, but ultimately, it is the HEI that needs to admit and enroll the students. Currently, most HEIs have the autonomy to establish their admission process, the tuition and fees they will charge, and the mechanisms they use to provide financial support to their students (besides the federal grants assigned directly to students). An early draft of the new constitutional reform included the elimination of a sentence in the constitution that reads "Universities and other institutions of higher education to which the law grants autonomy, will have the power and responsibility to govern themselves" (MX. Const. 2019). Although the government a few days later acknowledged that the omission was an honest mistake due to a "typing error", tensions between HEIs and the incoming government remain. Even after leaving the institutional autonomy guaranteed by the constitution, it seems contradictory to the compulsory component of the new legislation. Some of the concerns HEIs have are legitimately problematic. What will happen when a student who applies to a state university does not get in due to the unavailability of seats? Are their constitutional rights being violated and will the student be able to take legal action against the university? In a system as disperse as the Mexican one where a majority of the demand is already concentrated in a handful of institutions, this issue can quickly escalate.

Expanding Educational Infrastructure

The government has stated that in order to absorb quickly the demand for new available seats at public higher education institutions, they will create 100 new universities and enroll in them 300,000 students in the next six years (2018-2024). Building, but especially staffing, this large new infrastructure seems complicated to say the least. Experts

coincide in the impracticality of this measure: “The amount of money needed to develop 100 universities would be immense. It would be more practical to expand some of the existing universities and provide them with more funds” (Altbach, cited in Pells 2018). These new universities, called *Universidades para el Bienestar* (welfare or well-being universities) besides being completely free of tuition and fees and open to all (there is no admission test, but rather a ‘diagnostic evaluation’ of the candidates), will upon enrollment provide each student with a stipend of \$2,400 MXN per month (around 120 USD). Some of this new institutions are already operating using improvised facilities (Lloyd 2019). By September 2019, over 7,500 students were reportedly enrolled in one of the 36 programs initially offered (Rodríguez 2019).

Another concern regarding this project is related to the quality of education. In less than a year, the government managed to start delivering education at these institutions which is undoubtedly remarkable. However, scholars have criticized the government’s approach as being spontaneous. National and international journalists have documented the lack of proper infrastructure, faculty, and curricula, and even labeled these institutions as ‘ghost universities’ (Zerega 2019; Alemán 2019). So far, there is scarcity on data about the institutions, their website only mentions the programs offered and the cities where the universities are/will be located, but they don’t even disclose the exact address for these institutions. Without transparency on how these institutions were designed and are operating, it is very hard to evaluate their effectiveness.

Increasing Direct Aid to Students

A new program proposed by the incoming federal administration called “*Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro*” (Youth building the future) was designed to provide students with 1) practical and professional experience that can help to secure later a full-time employment, and 2) a stipend to help alleviate the cost of education and other living expenses. Through this program, students can receive a monthly stipend of MXN \$3,600 (around 190 USD per month) as long as they participate in an internship for up to one year. This program is more or less a centralized version of the U.S. “Federal Work-Study Program”. In this case the Federal Government would work with the private and public sector to offer part-time job opportunities to students and their salary would come directly through the Government. So far, over one million students have received this grant. This program is also open for people who are not currently employed or in education (the aforementioned ‘NINIs’ or ‘NEETs’). Since the practical internship can last up to one year, there aren’t many official results yet except for a press release where the Federal Government informed they have given out these grants to one million and three thousand recipients; however, only around 1.5 percent have secured full-time employment (STPS 2019). The number of participants who have enrolled or re-enrolled at a higher education program has not yet been made public.

The other programs are targeted specifically toward students currently enrolled at a public HEI and consist of a monthly stipend of MXN \$2,400 (around 120 USD per month). As stated before, students enrolled in one of the newly created ‘Universidades para el Bienestar’ automatically receive this stipend. The rest of the students need to apply for a stipend which is need-based, only students whose family per-capita income is below four times the minimum wage (2,900 MXN approx. per month or about 150 USD) qualify for this program.

Conclusion

Despite the best intentions of making into law that every young person in Mexico should be given the right to higher education, Mexico’s Federal Government needs to consider its manifold implications: Financial impact and financial sustainability, graduation or student success beyond just access, the quality of education, and insertion into the workforce postgraduation. A comprehensive plan to address each of the interconnected issues affecting access and success is needed. So far, the Federal Government’s plan seems to rely on creating new universities and on providing students with different forms of grants. These measures, while popular among some segments of the population, have been questioned by many experts who fear they might be motivated by electoral payoffs (Maldonado-Maldonado and

Rodríguez-Gómez 2019). Other concerns are related to the feasibility of investing all the resources needed to guarantee access to higher education.

Most importantly, the greatest critique is the plan designed to implement compulsory higher education; if the invested resources come only in form of new universities and direct subsidies to students, then the country is missing on the opportunity to capitalize the infrastructure already in place and to enhance the quality of teaching. The proposed policies lack a comprehensive vision, there is no mention about secondary education as the natural pipeline towards higher education. There is also a serious lack of policies to follow-up on access to focus also on student success indicators such as development of competencies, learning outcomes, and increased graduation rates.

The Government's new programs lack empirical support. Even now when they are being implemented, further research must be conducted in at least the following areas: 1) The effectiveness of providing universal stipends as opposed to allowing for the institutions to disburse those on amounts based on the students' needs; 2) The academic and professional outcomes of the new universities; 3) The effectiveness, in terms of higher education enrollment or re-enrollment, for the 'NINIs' participating in the government's internship program; and 4) the direct effect on access and coverage of having added higher education as compulsory.

Access to higher education in Mexico is a serious problem that needs several stakeholders' involvement to advance into a better system; one that is more inclusive, beneficial to the individual but also to the surrounding community. The government needs to continue to strengthen the primary and secondary levels of education both in terms of coverage and quality that ensures a college ready youth. It also needs to invest in infrastructure of higher education especially for the suburban and rural population who cannot afford to move to the cities in search of opportunities. Public institutions of higher education should continue to implement efficiencies in their operations so that the limited resources they have are better spent. They should also keep working on improving the quality of their programs so that the demand gets less concentrated at the usual institutions. Private Institutions need to use their position of privilege to accept more students no matter their SES. The private institutions struggling with accreditation efforts, should do a better job in securing first the quality of the education before any kind of profit or revenue. The civil society in general should keep pushing the aforementioned actors to comply with their duties. They should also encourage young people to pursue education as a mean for social mobility. Privileged members of the civil society should commit to help—via more donations and foundations—those in financial strain.

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