

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY

One of the activities defined by the UNESCO Chair in Higher Education in Latin America included the project "The Current Situation and The Main Dynamics of the Changes in Higher Education in Latin America". The results of the study were published in Spanish, by CRESALC/UNESCO and it has had three editions (1996, 1997 and 1998). The present is a sort English version of the complete Spanish report.

The project's main objectives were: 1) to gather and update information on the main dimensions and variables enabling higher education in the region to be characterized and exhaustively analyzed; 2) to obtain knowledge for each country on areas of higher education where information is weak or lacking; and 3) to pinpoint the main dynamics of the changes occurring in the different countries of the region. The complete version was published in Spanish under the title "

The idea behind these objectives, and thus behind the study presented here, is based on two central requirements: one, the need to provide the agenda for change of the *national higher education systems* (NHES's) with reliable updated data bases, and two, the need to resolve the shortcomings that are largely due to the fact that in many of the countries there are no statistics available for decision-making on the new policies. In addition to that, integrated regional studies on the main variables characterizing the current context of higher education in Latin America are even scarcer.

In order to meet the mentioned goals, and bearing in mind the fact that not only is the information obtained likely to be unreliable or incomplete, but methods may vary considerably from one country to another, an instrument was designed to ensure as much homogeneity and as many possibilities for comparison and analysis as possible.<sup>1</sup>

The instrument was sent out in the second half of 1995 to specialists in countries in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. The process whereby responses to the demand for information were received from each country varied considerably. In some cases these were rapid and in others much slower, fundamentally owing to the difficulties involved in obtaining the information required. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> The instrument was structured according to two broad lines or fields of information. The first refers to the basic indicators which divided into three sub-fields: basic development indicators, basic socio-educational indicators and basic higher education indicators. A total of twenty-one indicators were established for these three sub-fields, each of which was broken down, according to their properties, into items distributed into double-entry tables, tables and options of categories with a qualifying function, scale groups in tables. The second broad dimension of the instrument corresponded to the characterization variables of the situation of higher education in the region. This dimension is the instrument's most extensive and consists of 15 sub-fields of information, broken down into a total of 72 variables, and then in turn into items cross-indexed with categories having either a quantitative or a qualitative classifying function.

<sup>2</sup> Originally there were twenty countries as Puerto Rico was included.

experience initiated has thrown light on some interesting opportunities for integrated research in the region, although there are significant limitations which must be carefully analyzed and warrant consideration in another paper, but which generally speaking show that there is a need for efforts to be stepped up to produce integrated research methodologies on higher education in the region.

In the mid-eighties, CRESALC/UNESCO undertook the first regional attempt to gather up-to-date information on all the NHES's in the region. The result of those initial efforts was a series of Monographs from a large number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, published between 1984 and 1990. The integrated quantitative results of the monographs were presented in the report "*Quantitative View of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, CRESALC/UNESCO, 1991.*" Despite the large vacuums in this report, it was the first attempt at an integrated presentation of the data available.

One of the researchers who analyzed data at the regional level was José Joaquín Brunner. In his book, "*Higher Education in Latin America: changes and challenges*", he has given an overview with statistical information on this level of education with regard to the first half of the eighties. He also co-ordinated the project "*Comparative analysis of higher education policies in Latin America*", conducted over a five-year period by five academic institutions in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico, and financed by the Ford Foundation. This study focused on an analysis of higher education policies in those five countries.<sup>3</sup>

However, in the mid-nineties, the region had no updated information on the main variables of the higher education systems in the different countries. This project aims at filling those vacuums, well aware of the challenge posed by the difficulty in homogenizing information from such varied countries, some of them with great lacunas of reliable information.

The main feature of this study is the presentation of the latest information available at the time of its compilation in the nineteen countries of Latin America. It is therefore a synchronous study that will be both diagnostic and descriptive, and should offer huge potential for subsequent analyses of the situation of higher education in Latin America in the mid-nineties. The information - which in the majority of cases oscillates between 1994 and 1995, with some levels for 1993 - has been adjusted to the demand included in the instrument of the project described and therefore refers to the main variables of the NHES's. It has been arranged and presented so as to serve the interests of other researchers working on different types of comparative analyses. For that reason, all the data constructed and presented are based on the information obtained through the work undertaken in each country for that purpose. Thus, each of the national reports - in response to the instrument conceived by the project - makes a contribution to the creation of a referential data base on which this paper on integration, which fundamentally describes, classifies and compares, has been formulated. Only in cases where the information

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<sup>3</sup> The other authors who took part in this study were: Jorge Balán, Hernán Courard, Cristián Cox, Eunice Durham, Ana María García de Fanelli, Rollin Kent, Lucía Klelin, Ricardo Lucio, Helena Sampaio, Mariana Serrano and Simón Schwartzman.

does not emanate from the work undertaken for national cases, will reference be made to the respective sources; although these cases are few and far between.

The study was undertaken over a little more than a year, with the participation of national specialists for each of the 19 countries in the region. The ability to obtain responses is an indicator of the project's success, in that despite the limitations we refer to in other points, it shows that there the region offers plenty of opportunities and a real capacity for response to demands derived from lines of research with an integrated orientation.

Although in this study information on certain variables is obviously lacking, which would be key information as it corresponds to one of the objectives set and enables decisions aimed at overcoming them to be oriented; on the other hand it is important to stress that much of the information has not been easy to obtain. For some countries, the work involved not just gathering available information, but arduously seeking and compiling information because of the lack of agencies with up-to-date statistics on this level of education.<sup>4</sup>

The aim to pinpoint information gaps in certain areas and countries has been achieved. It was interesting to see how the efforts of national specialists in responding to the information guidelines requested, generated awareness of the need for data bases on the main variables of higher education for use by the countries themselves.<sup>5</sup> Finance was the area of information with the greatest problems. Due to the vast incongruencies between the different types of data, it was decided to leave only the most essential information and give up the idea of presenting more discriminated data. Research was another area where little information was available; as well as Science and Technology for which a decision was reached to present only information on the training of researchers; and *postgraduates* where the investigators did their best to find updated information on the number of programmes and enrolments.<sup>6</sup> Other areas on which it was hard to obtain information were connected

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the specialists' comments on the matter are given below:

"Due to the lack of publications on statistical information for higher education, from the Ministry of Education and Culture and from the National Council of Universities and Polytechnics (CONUEP), the information given in this report was obtained through interviews with officials and by reviewing data from the archives of both these institutions. In general, the data has been checked." (Carvajal, 1996:2).

"One of the main factors found to limit the ability to make an objective analysis of higher education is that the adequate, reliable information tends to be insufficient or out of date. (...) In the case of the public sector, there is no institutional capacity to compile and systematize it, due to budget restrictions. The private sector was somewhat reluctant to provide information, probably due to distrust caused by its zealous reaction to the enforcement of the new Higher Education Act." (Martínez, 1996:1-2).

"For us this was an initial study of higher education in Panama that illustrates the direction it is taking, notwithstanding the fact that it can be completed in order to gain a better outlook of it." (Catsambanis, 1996:3).

"(...) some of this data was *sought out* at various different institutions and does not come from specific or periodical publications (...) The data on CONESUP was provided by their office on diskette. As far as the UCR is concerned, the information was obtained from various offices in order to *produce* what was required." (Coto, E-mail of 16 July 1996).

<sup>5</sup> The case of Paraguay, Uruguay, Panama, El Salvador, among others.

<sup>6</sup> In any event, the CRE-UNESCO Chair in Scientific and Technological Development is producing a study focused mainly on research, science and technology. A study has also been conducted by researchers from the Academy of Science of Latin America which contains regional information on scientific development in the region. (See Villegas & Cardozo, 1995).

with the characteristics of the players, students and faculty. There is very little information available on students regarding such key aspects as: age, socio-economic level, drop-out rate, indices of entrance examinations, graduates. In the case of faculty, most of the countries have no information on average ages and academic levels, both of which are essential aspects for any change strategy.

It is important to point out that although the information on the public sector in many countries was not easy to obtain either due to the lack of adequate information units, or because such units as do exist do not function properly, the most serious case was actually the lack of information from the private sector. As can be seen from the information presented in this report, there is a wide gap in information on the private sector owing to the lack of records and/or because of reluctance to provide information.

However, this first publication of the study, with comprehensive information, is only preliminary version and will be followed by improved ones and the development of research on thematic and sub-thematic areas, by arranging and using systems for grouping, describing and classifying the information and data presented, as part of the process, and as a result of the study conducted. This is how the theoretical relevance of the study became the instrument of guidelines by dimensions, variables and indicators, which, when arranged in each of the tables presented, produce an implicit plan of cross-indexes which serve as an excellent starting point for subsequent and necessary research, whose purpose is to overcome the differences encountered in this initial effort. The possibility of any objective connected with enriching the lines necessary to add to the knowledge on the NHES's in the region being successful, will always depend on the resolute participation of the area's researchers to strengthen the determination to convert higher education into an area of knowledge with full intellectual and institutional legitimacy, and actively involved in the relationship with the region's national societies that is characteristic of our times..

The absence of information systems in the countries is a huge setback for any innovative policy that the NHES's wish to undertake. This problem affects most of the countries, with the exception of a very few which are striving hard to overcome it.<sup>7</sup> Further, the quality of the information obtained is crucial for all the processes of the current agenda change, as can be seen from the second half of this paper. In order for the evaluation, differentiation, integration, financing and equity processes to be put into context and adapted to the realities of the different countries, it is important to have a better understanding of the resources available and the change process best suited to each country.

The results of the paper are broken down into two main categories. The first eight chapters present organized and integrated data on the most

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<sup>7</sup> An example of the severity of the problem is Chile, a country which for some international agencies and authorities is the paradigm of "modernity" in terms of the reforms undertaken at its NHES's. Authors have written on the Chilean case: "At present there seems to be no global information mechanism capable of becoming a basic instrument for guaranteeing full transparency in a system which in practice has been set up with a logic of market regulation and free competitiveness from the institutions." (González & Peñafiel, 1995:17).

important variables of the NHES's. The rest of the chapters contain information on the reforms of the different countries based on their agendas for change.

The reports of the nineteen national cases will be available for consultation at the CRESALC/UNESCO Information and Documentation Service. Complementary information obtained after these are received will be attached to the report in each case. The first version of the national reports, provided by the researchers, will also be available on three diskettes at SID/CRESALC.

The results of this study were possible thanks to the efforts of the specialists from each of the countries of the region. We particularly wish to acknowledge all those who participated in this paper, especially those who were so frequently asked for clarifications and complementary data after they had handed in their report. Special thanks are also due to project assistant Gladys Pérez de Melet for her excellent co-operation.

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