

## 1. SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY

One of the aspects characterizing higher education in the region is the degree to which the variability of many of the aspects of national higher education systems (NHES's) coincides with the similarities between them. This dichotomy is peculiar to other aspects of these countries. Although Latin America shares two mutually understandable languages, a predominant religion and a common history and, even a similar stance towards the west, there are many things that set the different countries of the region apart from one another.

### *Population in higher education*

In 1994, the population of the nineteen countries comprising Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean<sup>1</sup> totalled around 500 million; a little over 180 million corresponding to the economically active population. The population between 20 and 24 years of age numbers some 42 million; so 8.8% of the population is in the higher education level age range, though the frontiers of this range are becoming increasingly blurred.

Half of the 42 million people in the region aged between 20 and 24 are in Brazil and Mexico. The population of these countries is 14 and 9 million respectively. At the other end of the scale are five countries with less than 500 people in the 20 to 24 age group. (See Figure 1.3 of this chapter).

Table N° 1-1  
Age Group 20-24 years 1994

9 to 15 million	1 to 9 million	500 thousand to 1 million	Under 500 thousand
Brazil	Argentina	Bolivia	Costa
Mexico	Colombia	El Salvador	Rica
	Peru	Guatemala	Nicaragua
	Venezuela	Honduras	Panama
	Cuba	Dominican Rep.	Paraguay
	Chile		Uruguay
	Ecuador		

Source: Table 1, Appendix II

### *Socio-economic characteristics*

<sup>1</sup> Not including Puerto Rico.

As far as socio-economic aspects are concerned, the differences lie in the amount of goods and services produced per person a year, the extreme cases being Argentina with a per capita GDP of \$8,060 and Nicaragua with \$330.

Table Nº 1-2  
Per capita GDP (US\$). 1994

8,060	5,000 to 3,000	3,000 to 1,500	1,500 to 1,000	Under 1,000
Argentina	Uruguay	Venezuela	El Salvador	Bolivia
	Mexico	Panama	Dominican	Honduras
	Chile	Costa Rica	Rep.	Nicaragua
	Brazil	Colombia	Ecuador	
		Paraguay	Guatemala	
			Cuba	

Source: Table 2, Appendix II.

There is also a vast disparity in the distribution of these goods and services, Latin America being one of the regions in the world with the greatest inequality. On average, the distance between the poorest 20% of the population and the richest 20% is greater than *ten*. Whereas, in the industrialized countries it is *six*, and *seven* in the Asian countries (Lechner, 1992). There are differences within the countries too and their internal inequality does not necessarily coincide with their capacity to produce goods and services. Brazil, for example, with a per capita GDP that puts it in the second largest income group in the region is the country with the greatest distance between what the poorest 20% of the population and the richest 20% of the population receives. At the other end of the scale is Uruguay, whose distance between the two quintiles being compared is less than the average distance of those same two quintiles in the industrialized countries.

Table Nº 1.3  
Classification of countries according to the distance between the lowest quintile and the highest quintile in the distribution of income. 1994

Less than 5 times	5 to 10 times	10 to 15 times	15 to 22 times
Uruguay	Argentina	Bolivia	Dominican Rep.
	Costa Rica	Colombia	Brazil
	Mexico	Chile	Nicaragua
	Paraguay	Guatemala	
	Peru	Honduras	
	Uruguay	Panama	
	Venezuela		

Source: Table 3, Appendix II

### *Education profile of the economically active population*

By 1994 the region's economically active population numbered 180,633,300 people, of whom some 25% had no minimum qualification, 31% had completed primary schooling and 31% secondary schooling.

Only 13.5% have undergone higher education, but there are considerable disparities among the different countries, not necessarily related to their level of development. This is illustrated by the fact that in Colombia, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Peru, more than 15% of the population has higher education qualifications.