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The Brain Gain: Education in Latin America

Education is an issue that is surging up the political agenda across the region. In Chile and Colombia there are major debates over the role for-profit higher education institutions should play in the national education system. In Mexico, Elba Esther Gordillo, the leader of the teachers' union, who effectively has run the country's poor national education system for the past 20 years, is (finally) facing a challenge to her deleterious authority. Ambitious governments across the region now recognise that educational attainment is a crucial element in sustaining economic growth. No government in the region has anything to boast about over its education system. Cuba, which appears to score highest on UN figures, had all but abolished illiteracy before the 1959 Revolution. Since then education standards have done little more than stagnate, even though Cuba spends far more (13.8% of its annual GDP) on education than any other country in the region. The next highest spenders, according to figures from the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America (Eclac) are Costa Rica and countries from the English speaking Caribbean who all devote over 6% of their GDP to education. Brazil and Mexico spend 5% and Chile 4%.

What makes education so important politically is that the region's population is young. This has two consequences: the first is that welfare payments are still a relatively small part of government spending, unlike in industrialised countries where ageing populations demand that more and more is spent on them. This means that education budgets are comparatively large and likely to hold their current levels, or perhaps rise, over the next decade or two, especially if governments across the region continue to increase the effectiveness of their tax systems and continue to enjoy the current mix of sustained and historically-fast economic growth. The second consequence of a comparatively young population is that the percentage of the population that should be in school is relatively high. This means improvement in education has an immediate effect on a large number of voters.

According to the World Bank, Brazil's school age (seven to 17 years old) population counts for over 20% of the total population. In Mexico, over 25% of the population is still of school age. In China the comparable percentage is down to 16.5% while in the US the figure is 17.5%. In ageing Japan, the figure is down to 12.1%.

This report will argue that most governments across the region are only now beginning to focus on shaking up their education policies. All are light years away from South Korea, the country which, according to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) educates its children best. South Korea recently announced that by 2014 all its school-children would be using electronic textbooks and teaching systems.

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Best in class

Latin America's best educated children are probably either: Chilean, Costa Rican, Cuban or Uruguayan. Costa Rica, the first in the Americas to mandate compulsory and free education (in 1869), has seen the proportion of secondary school pupils as a percentage of primary school pupils increase from 50% in 2000 to 83% in 2010 (Ministry of Education figures). This increase shows that more children are attending secondary schools because the overall number of pupils in the education system has not increased that much, rising from 949,598 in 2000 to 1,082,070 in 2010. Costa Rica is one of only four countries in the region (Chile, Cuba and Uruguay are the others), where a majority of the workforce has completed secondary education.

Altogether, Costa Ricans spend an average of 12 years in school. Chilean children spend an average of 14 years in school or college while Uruguayan children spend 15 years in school or college. Cuban children spend 16 years in school.

Cuba's problem is that the economy cannot provide decent jobs for the young people it educates. First in Africa, now South America, the Cuban state has to deploy its well-educated young people on political missions (now primarily education and health) to prevent them from swamping the informal economy.

Cuba's problem is not unique. Eight Latin American countries (but not Cuba) took part in the Pisa international tests for secondary school children in 2009, which were collated and published by the OECD. They all came in the bottom third of the 65 countries (which include Taiwan) surveyed. In Panama and Peru, nearly a third of the 15 year-olds tested were functionally illiterate. But this was better (for Peru) at least than the 2000 Pisa tests. Brazil and Chile also improved in the Pisa tests from 2000 to 2009, while Mexico, thanks to union leader Gordillo's baleful influence, made no significant progress.

The Pisa tests were debated across Latin America and one general conclusion was that governments had to do more to raise teaching standards. Ecuador, in particular has not shied away from pushing through education reforms which will lead to teachers losing their jobs if they do not perform. Beside this stick the government is also offering the carrot performance related pay and bonuses for good teachers.

Different countries have different educational targets. In Central America, literacy is still an issue, as it is in Haiti. In the region's economic powerhouses, equipping the next generation so that they can get proper (social security and tax-paying) jobs in an increasingly globalised economy is the goal. This is why Brazil is exploring the idea of sending 100,000 Brazilian students to British universities for degree courses. Such a deal would help Brazil educate its young people, and given the weakness of the pound sterling against the Real, be good value for Brazil. The advantage for the UK is that such an inflow of fee-paying students will keep the university system viable in its current form.

There is heaps of data on education, but making sense of it and drawing conclusions from it is complicated. Take the example of Bolivia: in 1970, according to the UN's Economic Commission on Latin America and Caribbean (Cepal), almost quarter of 18 to 24 year olds were illiterate: a generation (30 years) later the illiteracy rate had more than halved. Relating this achievement to education spending is difficult: according to Cepal, as late as 1991 Bolivia was spending only the equivalent of 2.4% of its GDP on education; but by 2001 this figure was up to 6% and has stayed thereabouts ever since. The literacy for 15 to 24 year olds, however only improved from 95.8% to 97.8% between 2000 and 2010. In Bolivia the big improvement in literacy rates came between 1970 and 1990 (from 76.4% to 92.6%) when spending was much lower.

Infrastructure.

A May 2011 report by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) pointed to some major deficiencies in terms of infrastructure for basic education schools. It showed that in Latin America, 40% of schools lack a library; 88% lack science labs; 63% do not have meeting rooms or offices for teachers; 73% lack dining rooms; 65% do not have a computer room and 35% lack space to do sports. More worryingly 21% lack access to clean drinking water; 40% do not have a drainage system; 53% do not have a telephone line; 32% have insufficient lavatories and 11% lack access to electricity. The report notes that these problems are particularly pronounced in Central America where, for example in Nicaragua, nearly 60% of schools lack electricity.

Latin America's elite is still often educated abroad, though perhaps more Latin Americans than a decade ago now do their first degree at a Latin American university before moving on to a US or European university. Inside Latin America, probably only the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Unam), one of the country's great institutions created just before the Mexican Revolution, and Cuba educate large numbers of Latin Americans. Cuba is especially strong in medicine and claims to train 3,500 doctors a year, mostly from Latin America.

REGION

Early Childhood Care and Education

Lack of a clear Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) strategy across the region is hampering access for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young children (up to five years old). The main challenges to better pre-school policy are: access, observance of child rights, efficient programme development and a lack of trained staff. Often, poor coordination between local and national government results in poor delivery and better management or allocation of resources is required. ECCE is important because it links together child rights, child development and, family and community participation in both education and local provision of services.

Latin America is facing several trends which underline the region's growing need for early-years education and care. Advocates of early education argue that it helps to reduce structural inequalities that characterise Latin American societies, by reducing access barriers. The region's governments are meant to take on most of the financial responsibility for implementing Education For All (EFA).

According to a report compiled by the UN's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) in preparation for the 2010 World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (WCECCE), there are next-to-no public finance figures for this kind of expenditure on ECCE, partly because investment comes from different sectors: health policy, social welfare, labour policy and education.

In spite of in-region variations, individual country analysis of ECCE policy has been possible in Brazil, Chile, Peru and Argentina. Brazil's Law 11.494, passed in 2007, created the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education (Fundeb), which will run until 2020. The law mandates a tenfold increase in federal resources for all education, providing funding for childcare access as well as for primary and secondary education.

The Unesco report also highlights the challenge that diversity within countries, linguistically and culturally, poses to delivery and access of ECCE. Education legislation, acknowledges to differing degrees indigenous populations and languages, however, this does not amount to implementation at the ECCE level.

Argentine law establishes that early education should be both intercultural and bilingual. Chilean legislation currently states that "the general objective of pre-school establishments with a majority of indigenous students is to ensure the pupils can understand and express simple messages in their own language". Whilst in Mexico, "special consideration is given to the early education of indigenous peoples".

Demographic and socio-economic transformations in the region have increased visibility of ECCE. Longer life expectancy, lower fertility rates, higher female entry into the work force, and an increased number of single-parent

International aid. The Unesco report notes that “national policies and financing have been the main source of progress towards the EFA goals”, but adds that “international aid has a key supplementary role, particularly among the poorest countries.” Aid disbursements for basic education in Latin America and the Caribbean increased from an average of US\$213m in 2002–2003 to US\$326m in 2007–2008. This translates into US\$6 per primary school age child in 2007–2008, up from US\$4 in 2002–2003. Just below 40% of all aid to education in the region (which, averaged over 2007 and 2008 amounted to US\$832m), a 48% increase from 2002–2003 was allocated to basic education in 2007–2008.

households have made ECCE part of the policy agenda. Private companies across the region already provide programmes to reduce the burden on female primary-caretakers and improve work opportunities for female employees with young families.

Increasingly, ECCE is seen to be crucial stage in a child’s development has led to mounting public pressure for targeted legislation and policy. However, slow progress to integrate different parts of ECCE does not bode well for better performance on ECCE indicators. By and large there has been little attempt to assimilate or map public and private initiatives, across-sector, and there are few monitoring and data collection systems. Despite family and community involvement in ECCE being encouraged and necessary, it is yet to be pulled into the early educational programs in Latin America. Broader societal participation is also necessary for ECCE to have a successful long term impact. As with successful primary education policies, social and political prejudices and perception have to be addressed in order for this kind of policy to bear fruit.

The Caribbean and ECCE

The Caribbean’s progress with ECCE has been patchy. The Unesco report details that Caribbean nations particularly lack existence and/or access to pre-primary education, monitoring and intervention services, quality of programs and there is little successful targeting of the disadvantaged demographics generally, let alone in ECCE.

By 2015 Caribbean countries will have implemented Early Childhood Development (ECD) policies and national regulatory standards for early childhood education that adhere to Caribbean Community (Caricom) rules. Long term goals for the region include: professional training of ECD staff, development of appropriate curriculum, increasing quality of education through trained staff and small class sizes.

Access ECCE is the main problem in the Caribbean region. The provision of informal child care methods, specialised children’s and parent’s welfare clinics, cash transfer programs for health evaluations and encouraging participation in ECCE programs will enable children under age three to develop mentally and physically. For children between the ages of three and five, Caribbean governments must invest directly in education and care facilities and encourage incentives for private investment to guarantee access to at least one year of pre-school education.

The Caricom Early Childhood Working Group, established in 2006, created a set of regional guidelines for ECD services which are meant to have been implemented since. As yet ECCE services are not included in wider social safety net programmes currently already implemented or under development in the Caricom countries.

PRIMARY EDUCATION

Mixed marks for primary

A 2002 report by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) noted that “over a decade ago, policymakers and educational leaders became aware of the fact that Latin America was far behind the rest of the world in the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of its primary education system”. This issue has received particular attention given that one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000 by the UN includes “universal primary education (UPE)” by 2015. While the latest annual (2011) Unesco Education for All Global Monitoring Report notes that most of the region is close to achieving UPE, it cites as the next challenge the need to improve levels of learning achievement.

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One indicator for access to primary education is the adjusted net enrolment rate (ANER) which represents the percentage of children of the official primary school age. According to the 2011 Unesco report, the ANER for Latin America for 2008 (the latest available figure) was 95%, up from 93% in 1999. Cuba boasts the highest NER of 99% in 2008 (up from 97% in 1999) while the Dominican Republic has the lowest (80%, remaining constant over the period).

Unesco also reports that while the numbers of children out of school might be on the decline, this is taking place at varying speed. Latin America and the Caribbean is home to just over 4% of the world's out-of-school children, with 2.9m children of primary school age not enrolled in school in 2008. However, while the number of children out of school in the region declined by an average of 181,000 a year from 1999 to 2004 it has risen by 33,000 a year since. Several countries with large out-of-school populations such as Brazil and Venezuela have registered a decline in the rate of progress – in Brazil for example, out-of-school numbers fell by 94,000 a year from 1999 to 2004 but rose by over 30,000 annually from 2004 to 2008. In contrast, progress has recently accelerated in some countries, including Colombia and the Dominican Republic.

Despite achieving near universal access to primary education (which was above the global average of 88% in 2008), challenges persist. One of the simplest measures of progress in primary education is that of the percentage of young people who complete primary education. The results are mixed. According to Unesco, the median survival rate to the last grade in primary school for Latin America was just 82% in 2007 (the most recent year with complete and comparable data), up from 81% in 1999 - far below the world average of 93% and country-level data points to a mixed record of progress.

The Unesco reports that most countries with data improved their rates between 1999 and 2007, with increases of 13 percentage points or more in Colombia (67% to 88%), El Salvador (62% to 76%) and Guatemala (52% to 65%). However several countries registered a decline. These include the Dominican Republic (71% to 69%), Panama (90% to 85%) and Venezuela (88% to 81%).

One cause of low completion rates has been the high rate of repetition in primary education. According to the IDB report, in 1988, Latin America “led the world in repetition, which was estimated at 29% in grades 1 to 6”. While Unesco figures put this figure at 5% by 2008 for Latin America, this still remains above the world average of 3%. Education experts cited as another priority the need for timely entry into primary school; according to Unesco, only 67% of children in the region actually start primary school at the right age. The OECD noted that in industrialised countries a high repeat rate hampered education and economic performance.

Inevitably entry, progression and completion of primary school are closely linked to household circumstances with children who are poor, live in rural areas or from ethnic or linguistic minorities facing higher risks of dropping out. A March 2011 report by the UN Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC), notes that “the difference in primary completion rates for rural and urban areas continues also to be very significant in the region. Only Chile, Ecuador and Uruguay show residential parity... with regards to ethnicity, only a few countries collect disaggregated education information. Within these countries, only Brazil and Chile show ethnic parity while Nicaragua experienced a decrease in this respect”.

The most recent Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean report by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Eclac) for 2010 highlights that “while only 2 out of 100 children in the higher-income

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strata (fifth quintile) do not finish primary school, in the poorer strata some 12 out of 100 do not. Primary education completion rates are 96% in urban areas but only 85% in rural areas”. The problem is worse among indigenous and Afro-descendent children: just 80% complete this cycle. This is evident in comparing attendance levels at primary school of indigenous and non-indigenous groups. According to Eclac, overall 93% of indigenous children enrol in primary education compared to 97% of non indigenous children. In terms of primary completion rates, this figure worsens to 82% and 93% respectively, dropping to 70% and 84% in rural areas.

New priorities

As well as addressing what Eclac dubs the “unresolved challenges of the twentieth century: coverage, access and timely progression and completion of education cycles”, the UN body cites as the other issue on the regional agenda the “great challenge of the twenty-first century: the quality of education provided by schools”. The poor quality of education offered was flagged up in the OREALC report which cites the findings of the last evaluation carried out by the Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of Quality Education (LLECE by its Spanish acronym) - the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study, SERCE in 2006. According to the SERCE report, on average, 36% of third graders do not achieve at least level II performance in reading.

The SERCE report showed that the percentage of students who have reached the highest level of reading comprehension ranges from 0.6% (Dominican Republic) to 44.3% (Costa Rica), while the percentage below the minimum level ranges from 0.6% (Cuba) to 31.4% (Dominican Republic). In terms of mathematics on average for the countries evaluated, 49.2% of third graders have not reached at least level II in mathematics while the percentage of students at the highest level ranges from 0.1% (Dominican Republic) to 54.4% (Cuba) and the percentage of those under the minimum level ranges from 1.1% (Cuba) to 41.3% (Dominican Republic).

Eclac cites as key to addressing this problem, the need to improve “teaching through training and integrating new educational resources such as information and communications technologies and putting traditional educational resources to better use”. There has been overall progress in some areas such as improving the pupil/teacher ratio in the region - from 26 in 1999 to 23 in 2008 according to the Unesco report (bar Colombia and Mexico which registered increases from 24 to 29 and 27 to 28).

The quality of teacher training remains an issue. The OREALC report (which also covers the Caribbean) notes that as of 2008, the proportion of teachers who meet national training requirements for primary education ranged from 36.4% (in Honduras) to 100% (Colombia, Cuba, Dominica and Suriname) in the countries for which information was available. On average, 78.8% of teachers in the region are trained. In ten countries, over 90% of teachers were certified in one subject, while fewer than 50% were certified in two.

Intra-regional discrepancies

A recent World Bank report highlights the discrepancy between the sub-regions in terms of universalising basic education services (which it measures on the basis of two criteria: timely completion of sixth grade (13 years old) and school attendance for ages 10-14). According to the World Bank 2010 Human Opportunity Report for Latin America and the Caribbean while the region will take, on average, almost a generation—22 years—to achieve this objective, Mexico should meet the Millenium Challenge goals and Andean countries should catch to this point by 2023. Central American countries and Brazil will take longer than the LAC average—27 years—while the Southern Cone countries will require 38 years to do so.

A key to betterment

“There is a very strong probability that any child who completes his or her secondary education will not fall below the poverty line..”

One of Neo-Liberals favourite correlations is the apparent relationship between completing secondary education or graduating from High School and avoiding poverty. There is a very strong probability that any child who completes his or her secondary education will not fall below the poverty line. The bulk of the social research has been done in the US, but the conclusion appears to apply to all countries. So it is a major sign of weakness that in only four countries in the region have a majority of the workforce completed secondary education.

These four countries are Costa Rica, Chile, Cuba and Uruguay. Altogether, Costa Ricans spend an average of 12 years in school. Chilean children spend an average of 14 years in school or college while Uruguayan children spend 15 years in school or college. Cuban children spend 16 years in school.

On international comparisons the quality of education in Latin America does not appear to be high. Eight Latin American countries (but not Cuba) took part in the Pisa international tests for secondary school children in 2009, which were collated and published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development.

All eight countries came in the bottom third of the 65 countries (which include Taiwan) surveyed. In Panama and Peru, nearly a third of the 15 year-olds tested were functionally illiterate. But this was better (for Peru) at least than the 2000 Pisa tests. Brazil and Chile also improved in the Pisa tests from 2000 to 2009 while Mexico made no significant progress.

The Pisa tests were debated across Latin America and one general conclusion was that governments had to do more to raise teaching standards. Ecuador, in particular has not shied away from pushing through education reforms which will lead to teachers losing their jobs if they do not perform. Beside this stick there is also the carrot of higher pay and bonuses for good teachers.

Different countries have different educational targets. In Central America literacy is still an issue, as it is in Haiti, which theoretically keeps its secondary school pupils in school until they are 19.

Chile

Chile only made education up to the age of 18 constitutionally mandatory in 2003. Until then education was only statutory for children aged between six and 13. It is worth noting that what has happened in Chile has validate the Neo-Liberal correlation. In 2000, 20.2% of all Chileans lived in poverty, but by 2009 that percentage had fallen to 11.5%, lower than the US's poverty rate of 14.3%.. The proportion of Chileans living in absolute poverty fell from 5.6% in 2000 to 3.6% in 2009. Government spending on education (as a percentage of GDP) increased from 3.6 % of GDP in 1998 and 1999 to 4.3% in 2008 and 2009.

So the rightwing government of President Sebastián Piñera is playing with fire by proposing a radical reform to the country's education system. Its proposals have been heavily criticised by the education establishment, and more importantly, school and university students.

The Secondary School is divided between Scientific-Humanist (regular), Technical-Professional (vocational) and Artistic, always with a duration of 2 years. The first two years are the same for the three kinds of schooling, while third and fourth years are differentiated according to the orientation of the school.

Mexican enrolment by institution

With regard to enrolment, 39.9% of Mexican university students register in autonomous institutions, 12.6% in state supported institutions, 14.8% in federal supported institutions and 32.7% in private institutions. Of those, 90.4% obtain Bachelor's degrees, 3.3% obtain associate degrees and 6.3% complete postgraduate studies.

The schools offering Technical-Professional programs are denominated:

Industrial Schools: electricity, mechanics, electronics, informatics, among others.

Commercial Schools: management, accountancy, secretary and similar.

Technical Schools: fashion, culinary, nursery and the like.

Polyvalent Schools: offering careers of more than one of those listed above.

Compulsory education only covered the 8 years of the Basic Cycle, but since May 7 of 2003, a constitutional reform under the government of president Ricardo Lagos established free and compulsory Secondary Education for all the inhabitants of Chile up to 18 years old, placing on the State the responsibility of ensuring access to it. This ensures thirteen years of compulsory schooling, which was an unprecedented milestone in Latin America at the time. As of 2008, the LGE (Ley General de Educación), which is currently pending, provides and guarantees 14 years of free compulsory education.

The coverage of the Chilean Educational System is practically universal, like in most highly developed countries, showing enrolment rates that represent that reality. Enrolment in Basic Education reaches 99.7% of children between 6 and 14 years, while the coverage of secondary education enrolment is 87.7% of adolescents between 15 and 18 years.

Brazil

Educational equality in Brazil has been on the rise over the past decade as a result of increased public spending in education, along with greater enrolment numbers. Net secondary school enrolment increased by 13 percent between 2000 and 2008, from 68.5 percent to 81.5 percent. The reduction of education inequality, along with the expansion of enrolment in schools, has been a direct result of the PT's policies.

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Some progress, but many challenges remain

Although Latin American governments have taken huge steps towards making education accessible to a larger segment of the population and some significant advances have been made, these seem to be directly related to the so-called formative years, mainly pre-school and elementary education. While all Latin American governments agree on the crucial importance of promoting top-notch university education in the region, a unifying public policy to ensure the maintenance of some sort of regional standard is still lacking. Furthermore, some countries also lack a mechanism to ensure university education within the country doesn't vary from one university to another; or the campus of one university in the capital city with the education imparted in the same university's campus in a remote province. Thus, it appears that higher education is a field where progressive rhetoric and political militancy collide head-on with a traditionalist conservative system adverse to reform and change.

Although many segments of Latin American society which had been traditionally marginalised from the higher education system, especially those submerged in poverty, have increasingly gained access to levels previously reserved for the elites or the middle classes, the figures compiled by Siteal (Sistema de Información de Tendencias Educativas en América Latina) indicate that this expansion is about to reach its ceiling. While

The geographical distribution challenge

While access to undergraduate study is equitably distributed across Mexico – Mexico City only accounts for 13.4% of Bachelor's degrees on offer-, Master's and Doctoral degrees are highly concentrated in the capital, with 21.7% of the former and 50.4% of the latter being taught in the DF.

more students from poor backgrounds appear to be accessing education, the figures also show that drop out levels amongst them are very high and, in some countries, they are on an upward trend. Generally speaking, and despite the efforts of some governments to open up higher education accessibility to all, the poor are still finding it hard to enter, and successfully finish, university.

Nonetheless, overall increased attendance should be celebrated as an improvement and a positive sign of continued progress in the future. In Mexico, for example, 12 out of every 100 people between the ages of 19 and 23 were reaching university level in the 1990s; by 2008, that figure had climbed to 1 out of every five, turning Mexico's higher education into a mass system. The problem, however, is that access is determined by standardised examinations, for which students of a lower income background may be less prepared than their richer counterparts. Students applying for university entry are allocated places on the basis of their results, until the quota established by the institution is filled. This means that those with poor education backgrounds and substandard entry examination performances are unlikely to access top quality university education.

Argentina faces a similar challenge, which is reflected year after year in the highly competitive entry course exams for the medicine and veterinary schools of the country's main public universities, Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) and Universidad Nacional de La Plata (UNLP). In December 2010, after a year-long mandatory "levelling course", only 17% of the students, who had registered their intent to enter UBA's medicine school, passed the entry exam.

However, a quick glance at the table accompanying this article demonstrates that the region is not missing out on the number of universities; in fact, in countries like Nicaragua or Colombia, some public universities have several campuses in different regions. In Cuba, where all universities are free and public, there are higher education institutions in all provinces and there is a constant drive to ensure people have access to university education in all municipalities. Critics, however, point out that education in the far removed provinces is not on par with instruction in the Havana campuses, creating a geographical and economic bias the Cuban government has somewhat tried to address by creating a scholarship programme that covers transport, food and housing, for students needing to travel to Havana to read courses not taught in their home provinces.

In the Central American isthmus, a regional council – the Central American university higher council (CSUCA) – has been a pioneer in establishing norms of academic quality assurance as well as promoting the integration of higher education curricula across the region. In 1962, the council spearheaded quality assurance by creating the regional degrees and graduate system (Sicar), followed by the Central American system of assessment and accreditation of higher education (Sicevaes) in 1998. Both systems are intended to ensure that students who complete a degree in one country are able to use their diploma in a regional neighbouring country without the demanding requirements of equivalencies. Since 2005, there have been ongoing discussions about the creation of a Central American commission for the accreditation of postgraduate syllabi, which would expand the aforementioned quality assurance mechanisms' remit to the international level, serving as an institution that would guarantee the quality of Central American degrees to an international audience.

The problem in Central America, however, is that the individual countries lack internal organizations with a similar role to those developed at the regional level. Thus, the syllabi of university education for all countries in

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the isthmus is controlled by committees made up by members of the country's largest public university, generally known as the council of rectors; in other words, the same people imparting the courses are in charge of ensuring the latter's quality.

In Mexico, the responsibility of drafting the national development plan for higher education falls on each government at the time of taking office and is in place for the six years of each presidential term. In turn, the ministry of public education (SEP) is responsible for implementing the dictates of the executive power and devises the fine print of syllabi. Here, the numerous subsystems of federal public universities, state public universities, technological institutes, universities and polytechnics, private institutions, research centres and teacher training institutions are all subjected to the monitoring and control of the SEP.

STUDYING ABROAD

Brazil and Chile stimulate overseas studying

While traditionally Latin America has seen students travel overseas to obtain top notch graduate and postgraduate degrees, it was not until recently that South American governments began stimulating this practice by sponsoring students with scholarship programmes. Chile has traditionally led the way in this practice, with a significant number of students completing courses abroad (*as shown in the table below*). However, Chile is by no means the country with the highest number of students overseas, but what sets it apart is that many of those able to obtain their education overseas did so with state backing in the form of scholarships; conversely, in the majority of the other countries it is generally affluent students, or those who win scholarships funded by foreign sources, who have enjoyed this privilege in the past –and in many places to this day.

A key element of state sponsored scholarships to study abroad is that the recipients make a commitment to return to their mother country and work, often in state-owned companies or government offices, upon completion of their studies. This ensures that, at least in part, the scholarship programme doesn't stimulate a brain-drain and that those who benefit from it are able to contribute their newly acquired knowledge in the work place as well as teaching others at home.

In July 2011, Brazil announced it will give 100,000 scholarships (75,000 funded by the government and 25,000 by the private sector) to send students in the natural sciences and engineering fields to study abroad. The funds will only be available to postgraduate students and the merit-based competition will be open to all Brazilians in cutting edge fields. The move clearly aims to replicate Chile's international higher education push, but with the scale of the Brazilian economy, it is also reminiscent of similar policies adopted by China and India in the first decade of the XXI century.

While many commentators in Brazil reacted adversely to the news, saying it would stimulate the brain-drain, or lead to nepotism, with the children of political leaders benefitting most, the truth is US and European universities are still considered the best in the world. If Brazil is to begin competing in technological innovation, the internationalization of its graduate students in the fields of science and technology is the only way forward.

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Country*	Students studying abroad from *			Five principal destinations and numbers				
	MF International mobility rate %	Pass rate abroad %		1	2	3	4	5
Argentina	9060	0.4	0.3	US 2538	Spain 1947	Cuba 864	France 768	Italy 560
Bahamas	2311		8.0	US 1544	Canada 276	T&T 85	Jamaica 77	UK 25
Bolivia	9749	2.5	1.0	Cuba 5349	US 965	Venezuela 796	Spain 637	Argentina 491
Brazil	23410	0.4	0.3	US 7586	France 2941	Portugal 2204	Germany 1878	Spain 1337
Chile	6664	0.8	0.5	US 1687	Spain 1016	France 737	Argentina 656	Germany 597
Colombia	18082	1.2	0.4	US 6669	Spain 3014	France 2281	Germany 1074	Australia 740
Costa Rica	1849	...	0.4	US 928	Cuba 224	Spain 116	Germany 112	France 96
Cuba	1378	0.1	0.2	Spain 583	Italy 126	Germany 110	France 96	US 82
Dom Rep.	2317	0.2	US 1160	Spain 360	Cuba 358	Canada 99	France 71
Ecuador	8434	1.6	0.7	US 2154	Spain 1882	Cuba 1825	Chile 459	Italy 421
El Salvador	2735	1.1	0.5	US 941	Cuba 800	France 151	Spain 125	Honduras 102
Guatemala	2735	1.1	0.2	US 1020	Cuba 603	El Salvador 274	Spain 119	Honduras 102
Guyana	1413	18.1	2.2	Cuba 797	US 300	UK 99	Canada 57	France 45
Haiti	3969	0.4	France 1289	US 873	Canada 867	Cuba 624	Venezuela 62
Honduras	2508	1.7	0.3	US 1069	Cuba 862	Spain 126	El Salvador 86	Germany 46
Jamaica	5913	9.7	2.3	US 3875	UK 631	Cuba 274	Canada 237	Jordan 235
Mexico	25444	1.0	0.3	US 14853	Spain 2103	France 1751	UK 1303	Germany 1299
Nicaragua	2328	...	0.4	Cuba 892	Costa Rica 402	US 389	Venezuela 173	Honduras 117
Panama	2263	1.5	0.8	US 131	Cuba 541	Spain 122	Chile 93	Venezuela 55
Paraguay	2243	1.2	0.5	Cuba 746	Argentina 392	US 377	Spain 163	France 90
Peru	14719	1.2	0.5	US 3676	Spain 2861	Chile 1523	Cuba 1422	Italy 1243
Trinidad & Tobago	4837	...	3.6	US 2643	UK 834	Canada 573	Granada 229	Barbados 197
Uruguay	2207	1.6	0.9	Argentina 500	US 458	Cuba 367	Spain 308	France 140
Venezuela	12428	0.6	0.5	US 4451	Cuba 3250	Spain 1517	France 492	Portugal 452

Indigenous universities gain ground

Defining indigenous identity

The definition of what criteria are used to determine indigenous identity is controversial and have been ascribed to language (mother tongue and language currently spoken) and self-identification as indigenous (the basis for the Bolivian census). Of these, 49.5% self-identified as Quechua; 40.6%, Aymara and 2.5% as Guaraní.

Nearly three years after President Evo Morales signed a decree in 2008 establishing three indigenous universities in Bolivia – the first of their kind – they opened for the academic year beginning 2010. The three La Universidad Indígena Boliviana Comunitaria Intercultural Productiva (UNIBOL) Tupak Katari unlikely to have immediate far-reaching effects given persistent inequalities between indigenous and non-indigenous education which exist lower down the system, the Katari call to students to sit entrance exams is one step towards consolidating President Morales' vision of education as a key tool in achieving his declared aim of "decolonising" the State and putting an end to "500 years of [indigenous] subordination".

Six months before Morales (himself an Aymara by birth, though most anthropologists argue, more of a Marxist in outlook) promulgated Bolivia's new 'plurinational' constitution, which for the first time enshrines indigenous rights, he signed a decree in August 2008 establishing the Aymara Tupac Katari university in the highlands; the Quechua Casimiro Huanca university in the central province of Cochabamba and a Guaraní Apiaguaiki Tumpa university in the lowlands. He announced that the construction and maintenance of the universities would fall under the remit of the education ministry and be financed by 15% of the "Fondo Indígena", a US\$52m (BS\$366m) fund created from the new direct tax on hydrocarbons (IDH).

Bolivia has the largest and most diverse indigenous population in the region, with 38 indigenous peoples, accounting for 62% of the country's 8.3m inhabitants according to the latest 2001 census, albeit a figure which continues to arouse controversy (see sidebar). Morales's announcement of the new indigenous universities provoked much debate about their aims and purpose. He said that they were 'indigenous' not just in terms of offering courses in the respective indigenous languages (alongside Spanish) but also through incorporating indigenous ways of learning and knowing as part of a process of mental 'decolonisation' and promoting the principles of intra- and inter-culturalism and the link between education and economic production.

The Tupac Katari institute focuses on textiles and the food industry, the Casimiro Huanca university specialises in agronomy, forestry management and tourism and the Apiaguaiki Tumpa university offers courses relating to hydrocarbons, forestry, veterinary science and fish farming. There are already around 900 students attending Casimiro Huanca and Apiaguaiki Tumpa Universities, they offer qualifications ranging from bachelor's to master's degrees, which will be accepted at a national level (although it should be noted that the university system in Bolivia is far from standardised – see sidebar).

While less than 4% of the population are educated to university level according to the latest, 2008 figures from the national statistics institute, Morales's efforts to promote tertiary indigenous education are nonetheless significant in terms of illustrating certain aspects of his vision of the role of education as a tool for 'decolonising' the state. The founding principles of the universities chime with the concept of education offered under the new constitution (article 78) which stipulates that education should be both plurinational (meaning that education should be in Spanish and the local indigenous language) and intercultural (not only conveying knowledge of indigenous cultures but actively promoting inter-community relations). These ideas also underpin the 2006 education bill known as the "Avelino Siñani – Elizardo Pérez" law, promulgated by Evo Morales on 21 December 2011 to make the education system "secular, centralised and anti-imperialist."

Standardisation

A 2009 report by the Unesco's International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (Iesalc) highlighted the relative lack of standardisation characterising the university system in Bolivia despite the existence of two regulatory structures – one, the Estatuto Orgánico de la Universidad Pública Boliviana, governing public universities (which total 21) and second, the Reglamento General de Universidades Privadas, for private universities (put at 59).

Breaking with the past

When considering Morales's vision of education, it is worth noting that the principle of bilingualism is not entirely new. It was established under the 1994 education law passed under the first government of former President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993 to 1997) as part of efforts to increase government control over the sector and weaken teachers' unions. The reform, which established the right of indigenous people to learn in their own language and may have also played an important role in the indigenous political emergence of the late 1990s. At the time of its approval the reform was seen as a way of shoring up support for the government's neo-liberal reforms and quieting territorial demands.

Think tanks such as the Canadian foundation for the Americas (Focal) have noted differences between the idea of bilingualism underpinning the 1994 reform and Morales' vision of 'inter-cultural bilingualism' in terms of the former emphasising only its linguistic aspect while the latter is more political, incorporating indigenous culture and values to challenge the ontology "of school knowledge". Educational theorists such as Peruvian socio-linguist Luis Enrique López have also noted certain 'submersion strategies' associated with past bilingual approaches, aimed at "the assimilation into the mainstream of indigenous populations with the subsequent gradual substitution of their ancestral languages and cultures." Hence the significance of Morales's remarks, when signing the decree establishing the Tupac Katari University, that the driving principle was to "decolonise Bolivia...with the lessons to be in Aymara...Spanish will be the subject".

A further point worth noting when comparing past and current ideas of the value of bilingual education concerns the issue of perceived usefulness; in the past, many parents resisted the idea of their children learning indigenous languages, fearing it would create a barrier to access economic and political power. This has arguably been redressed by the constitutional validation of indigenous identity evident in articles 5, 11 and 235, which require central and local government officials, as well as civil servants, to speak at least two languages.

Number of public, private and technical higher education institutions

Country	Public U	Private U	Technical U
Argentina	49*	46*	N/A
Bolivia	11	3	N/A
Brazil	109*	53*	6
Chile	19*	17*	6
Colombia	32*	42*	N/A
Costa Rica	3	10	1
Cuba	17	N/A	4
Dominican Republic	14	14	9
Ecuador	6	14	14
El Salvador	5	39	5
Guatemala	10	35	1
Honduras	8*	15*	17*
Mexico	50*	42*	37*
Nicaragua	29*	61*	16*
Panama	13*	21*	N/A
Paraguay	8	24	N/A
Peru	26*	56*	N/A
Uruguay	15	24	N/A
Venezuela	24*	24*	N/A

*Note: *Universities may be counted more than once when the same institution has several campuses in different provinces, states or departments.*

Continuing inequalities

Critics are quick to note that while the establishment of the new universities is a symbolic step forward, considerable work remains in terms of tackling more fundamental inequalities which exist further down the schooling system. To give an idea of the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous education levels, the national statistics institutes (INE)'s 2008 household survey showed 57.6% of indigenous language speakers completed primary education compared to 82.4% of Spanish speakers, dropping to 32.1% and 72.4% respectively for secondary education.

“The Focal report notes that since taking office for the first time in January 2006, Morales has made some progress in addressing these inequalities, largely through government initiatives such as the ‘Juancito Pinto’ cash transfer scheme.”

The Focal report notes that since taking office for the first time in January 2006, Morales has made some progress in addressing these inequalities, largely through government initiatives such as the ‘Juancito Pinto’ cash transfer scheme. Established by decree in October 2006 with IDH funds, the scheme, increased in 2011 provides B\$300(US\$43) - up from B\$200(US\$29) - a year to children from first to sixth grade (extended in July 2008 to eighth grade) as an incentive to attend school. The Canadian think tank highlights that this has served to reduce gaps in primary education “at least in terms of enrolment...in 2002 the difference between indigenous and non-indigenous students was greater than seven percentage points, whereas in 2008 it fell to three”.

However, a 2011 appraisal of the conditional cash transfer programme, by Focal and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that effectiveness of the programme was hampered by lack of educational infrastructure and differentiating between rural and urban children would help focus the policy. According to Focal, 96.1% of non-indigenous children and 89.7% of indigenous children were enrolled in primary education in 2002 compared to 98.7% and 95.7% respectively in 2008. This has yet to follow suit at a secondary level (14-18) however, with 81.3% of non-indigenous children and 60% of indigenous children enrolled at a secondary level in 2002 compared to 85.7% and 67.4% in 2008.

In terms of tackling the inequalities, Focal makes four main policy recommendations. These include:

- 1) focused interventions created for specific population groups and rural areas;
- 2) interventions to improve the quality of primary education, since this could promote continuation and reduce dropout rates, especially in rural areas. This must include the appointment or reposting of teachers and encourage teacher training;
- 3) a universal policy push to stimulate registration and continuation in secondary school
- 4) the distribution of school inputs according to the particular needs of indigenous students, especially in low income-per-capita areas.

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