

Higher Education Reform in Ecuador

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During the past four years, Ecuador has been featured in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and other worldwide media outlets for its unprecedented higher education reform efforts (e.g. free tuition in all public universities, supporting indigenous dialects as official language of instruction, university accreditation process, scholarships for students to obtain doctoral degrees abroad). Noteworthy about this reform process, the higher education system has shifted from one that operated within a policy vacuum, where little investment or control existed (Twombly, 1998), to one where stern government oversight guides educational reform efforts. In this essay, we summarize key highlights of this reform process. The main questions that guided our examination were: (1) What is the current status of the system of higher education in Ecuador? (2) What is Ecuador (i.e., government, institutions of higher education, private sector) currently doing to improve its system of higher education? (3) What can we learn from higher education reform in Ecuador?

Emerging Themes

There is a growing impetus in Ecuador to create a system of education where process and product are important pillars for an educational reform. This reform appears to be driven by three foundational principles: a) greater accountability from universities, b) greater access to higher education, and c) interest to enhance the quantity and quality of research produced.

Greater Accountability from Universities. As part of the 2010 Higher Education Law, the government led a process of institutional accreditation focused on four areas: a) quality of academic/faculty community, b) student learning and development, c) administrative policies, and d) research production. All colleges and universities were ranked across five categories (i.e., A, B, C, D, and E), with category A representing the highest performing category. In 2009, out of 68 institutions evaluated, 26 institutions were placed in category E (lowest performing category) and were given 18 months to draft and implement an improvement plan. Making national and international headlines, in April 2013, 14 universities from this group were shut down, displacing over 40,000 students who took part in a contingency plan to complete their career (CEAACES, 2013). In 2013, a second round of evaluations took place. This time, category E was eliminated, focusing on institutional improvement. At this time, campus extensions and regional campuses were included. Table 1 presents data from this evaluation.

Table 1. Institutional Accreditation Categories: 2013

Institutional Accreditation Results	
Categories	2013
A	3
B	22
C	18
D	8
E (Category Removed)	--
TOTAL	51

Greater Access to Higher Education for Ecuador's Citizens. The Ecuadorian 2008 Constitution redefined higher education as a public good (Van Hoof et al., 2013). As such, Ecuadorian public higher education became free (tuition) and accessible to the public. At the post-secondary level, enrollment data in Ecuador revealed a 27% increase of students admitted to higher education in the country between 2009 (57,281 students) and 2012 (71,995) (Senescyt, 2013). According to SENESCYT (2013), there are a total of 555,413 students enrolled in higher education. To manage the process of admissions in public institutions, the government implemented a nation-wide exam. To gain admission, students must obtain 550 points or higher in a 1000 point scale, which will determine their placement not only across institutions but also in over 1800 majors and careers offered across the country.

Interest to Enhance the Quantity and Quality of Research. Notorious attention has been shifted towards research production and knowledge distribution. However, many scholars have noted concerns considering that historically research has received very little support in Ecuador, and teaching has been at the center of the mission of all universities in the country (Van Hoof, Estrella, Eljuri, & León, 2013). To address these challenges, the government has focused its efforts on three fronts: a) policy changes that require graduate and post-graduate degrees to serve as faculty members; b) offer support and funds to pursue graduate education (abroad); and, c) build campus infrastructure for research.

Highlighting some of these efforts, the 2010 Higher Education Law stipulated that by 2017, at least 70% of faculty in each institution must have a PhD. Faculty members who have not attained this credential will be demoted in rank (CEACCESS, 2013). Currently the government offers Ecuadorians the opportunity to complete post-graduate degrees in top universities across the world. As 2014, the National Secretary of Higher Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (SENESCYT) reported that over 7,000 scholarships have been granted (covering tuition costs and living expenses). In return, students will work in Ecuador and work for a time equivalent to twice the duration of their time spent abroad. With respect to research infrastructure, in 2014, the government in Ecuador inaugurated Yachay (City of Knowledge), a 1.3 billion investment located in the northern part of the country, and described as a 30 year commitment to building the first planned STEM campus and city in the country.

Conclusion

It is promising that the Ecuadorian government has taken an active role managing, investing, and developing avenues to assess and evaluate the quality of the educational system. However, serious issues remain with regard to the planning and execution of reform efforts. Our work revealed that several groups and key-stakeholders (i.e., faculty, students, administrators, industries, researchers, and policy makers) wish to take a more active role in the decision making process. In addition, they voice concerns of a severe disconnect between government plans and demands, and the capacity of their institutions to implement those reforms. To move towards the product (enhance the quality of education of the country), it is imperative to strengthen the guidance, support, feedback, resources, and a plan (the process) to navigate the demands of educational reform.

References

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