

## TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA



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### ABSTRACT

Education as a right is an issue that requires constant reflection, aimed not only at discussing the way education is provided but also at proposing strategies, plans, programs and public policies that have a significant impact on guaranteeing quality, pertinent and easily accessible education to the population. In Latin America, there are different forms of inequalities and different social problems that in one way or another have also had an impact on education, or perhaps the lack of access to education has caused social problems to worsen due to the lack of equity in different spaces and contexts. This paper reviews some of the trends and challenges that factors such as privatization, information and communication technologies, among others, have been generating in the field of higher education in Latin America, emphasizing the impact that these phenomena have on education systems and also presenting the possibility of new scenarios of opportunities for transformation that can be given from the promotion of education as a public good committed to development not only in the region but globally.

**Keywords:** Higher education, trends, challenges, rights, access, information and communication technologies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Public education is immersed in a scenario of changes and transformations in global dynamics, which requires higher education institutions to adapt quickly to new realities in order to respond positively to these dynamics. The following are some reflections arising from academic, staff and professional experiences on higher education in Latin America. First of all, a contextualization of the knowledge societies is presented, followed by the trends and challenges of higher education in the region, ending the document with conclusions and contributions aimed at generating new discussions on the transforming processes in local and regional education systems.

When speaking of higher education, it is necessary to mention the changes that have occurred historically as a society and that in one way or another affect it; in the first instance, humanity went from being immersed in purely agricultural societies where knowledge was obtained in a practical and inherent way to human beings, to industrial and industrialized societies that gave priority to the novelty of machines as fundamental components for development. Currently, humanity is in transit through a new type of societies in which information and knowledge is power and that power represents development for countries, these societies are called knowledge and information societies.

Knowledge societies are characterized, as Bell (2001) puts it, by being centered on *“an economy based on services and whose professional structure is marked by a preference for a class of technically qualified professionals where theoretical knowledge has become the main source of innovation and the starting point for political and social programs”*. These types of societies are represented by States that concentrate their progress on access to information and knowledge, as key mechanisms for the development of their nations. However, these same societies also represent a high number of inequalities that mean that not all their citizens have the same access to this information and knowledge, generating new forms of inequalities and social gaps.

In the case of Latin America, academic knowledge and specifically university education is affected by a series of trends that, although they have an impact on the region's educational systems, are also a clear and precise invitation to redefine educational scenarios, where quality education processes are truly accessible to the entire population.

## TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Since the countries of Latin America share similar conditions in terms of educational policies, it is possible to observe some common characteristics that cross their educational systems. On the one hand, knowledge societies demand *“higher levels of education, and on the other hand, this is made possible through information and communication technologies -ICTs-, both of which are transforming access to information, and therefore also contribute enormously to access to higher education”* (Garcia, 2005).

One of the main trends in Latin American countries is the boom in the use of digital platforms, which through virtuality allow greater interaction between educational institutions and students, as well as facilitates access to quality education remotely and at times that are easier for the student. In Colombia, for example, there is an increase in the number of programs offered through agreements and articulation between foreign and local institutions, offering various modalities that are used according to the interests, needs and possibilities of the learner, most of them requiring the use of this type of platforms.

However, just as ICTs facilitate access to education, they also become a point of imbalance for those who cannot access connectivity in an easy and timely manner. While in Cuba, *“the use of ICTs has increased, with particular emphasis on scientific research and university management”* (CINDA, 2011), in Colombia, Panama and Venezuela, in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic, there were large gaps in connectivity. This component became a factor that hindered education mainly for the poorest students, not only in rural areas where in many cases there is no energy, telephone or internet infrastructure, but also in urban areas where the population located in the outskirts of the cities do not have technological devices that allow them to access education remotely, showing structural flaws not only in the education system but also in other governmental systems.

In terms of access to quality higher education, this is one of the most representative trends, because despite the progress made in this area, total coverage has not yet been achieved, taking into account the total number of inhabitants of each country. In the case of Colombia, *“the education system continues to grow significantly from 1,137,657 students in 2005 to 1,587,928 in 2010 with an average growth rate of 7%, which at its peak reached 9.48% in 2008. Nevertheless, as the figures show, the system continues to be highly inequitable and exclusive”* (CINDA, 2011). While it is true that education is a constitutionally proclaimed

right to which access should be unrestricted and to which the Nation-States are committed to guarantee free access, in Latin American countries where inequalities and social problems are becoming more and more acute, higher education continues to be a luxury to which not everyone can have equitable access.

Garcia (2005), states that *“education must be considered a public good, within a conception of education aimed at achieving socially sustainable, more balanced development throughout the planet, and with greater equity between and within peoples”*, i.e., considering education as a fundamental component in achieving equality and equity in societies. An example of the importance of the declaration of higher education as a public good is what is happening in Venezuela, where, as soon as the universalization of access began to be discussed, a significant increase in the growth of student enrollment in the country was glimpsed, mainly because one of the governmental banners in higher education is to deepen issues such as inclusion and equity in access.

The increase in the privatization of higher education in Latin America is a point that requires special analysis, due to the increase in the number of private educational institutions. In this sense, Garcia (2005) states that *“it is necessary to sponsor debates about the necessary defense of education as a global public good, where there is room for the construction of citizenship (national and global) and not only the teaching of technical competencies”*. Thus, despite the fact that education is recognized as a constitutional right, with the different economic, political and governmental interests surrounding the educational systems, we are facing a phenomenon of commercialization of education, where private interests prevail and see it as an income-generating service rather than as a right *“with the exception of Cuba and Venezuela, in the rest of the Ibero-american countries for which information is available, the number of private university institutions is greater than the number of public ones; they practically double it”* (CINDA, 2011).

Faced with the issue of privatization, Lopez Segrera (2016) expresses that *“the privatization of higher education is increasing rapidly in North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, in Asia and in the countries of Eastern Europe and Russia. Only in the regions of Western Europe and Africa does public higher education funded almost entirely by the state continue to predominate.”* In different countries of the region, the so-called *“garage universities”* have emerged, whose main purpose is to increase the number of graduates

while minimizing their quality, turning them into diploma factories and moving away from the main purpose of higher education as the formation of integral, integral and suitable professionals concerned with the development of their regions.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization states that quality should go beyond ensuring admission and permanence and should include conditions for teaching-learning and academic achievement and should also be concerned with the promotion of teacher qualification and the management and investment of resources and infrastructure. For its part, the Organization of Ibero-american States-OAS- (2010), states that quality is not a single characteristic of education but is linked to other processes that must be improved, such as efficiency and effectiveness. In view of these statements, ministries of education such as Panama's have established the quality of education as one of their sustainable development objectives, demonstrating the importance given by the country to investing in training and qualification aimed at raising the quality and conditions of teaching, research and social projection of higher education institutions.

However, despite all the structural deficiencies of the systems, higher education is facing an emerging institutional diversification in which the creation of varied study programs in accordance with both global and local needs is increasing. This diversification of the academic offer is important to the extent that it also increases the interests of the population in subjects such as postgraduate studies, which, due to the availability of time and economic facilities, are almost always chosen to be carried out in foreign universities that meet the needs of the students. In the specific case of Colombia, postgraduate programs are expensive and mostly face-to-face or semi-face mode, and compared to the virtual options and better prices offered by universities such as those in Panama and Venezuela, it is more attractive for those who decide to continue with their academic training.

### **CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA**

Now, if we talk about trends, these trends also generate challenges to the educational systems, which can be translated into opportunities for transforming higher education in Latin America, among the challenges of universities is to work for the promotion of accessibility to equal and quality education without restrictions. Certainly, there is a politicization and privatization of higher education, but it is also true that the academy is called to transform

the social, political and economic realities of countries and regions.

Local and regional universities from the planning of their administrative units “*should plan actions based on priority, concrete and contextualized needs and, at the time of executing budgets, these resources should be allocated to the actions for which they were planned.*” (Salazar, M., Palacios, S., & Cortes, I. , 2020), carrying out the development of administrative management processes in accordance with institutional educational policies that allow bringing quality and accessible education to the population.

Recognizing that higher education as an integral system requires the successful meshing of the different elements that compose it, is a challenge that leads to reflect on the elements that integrate the educational systems and that have a fundamental role in its strengthening, among which we can mention the States as regulatory entities of the nations, which have the tacit commitment to redistribute the resources that at national level are granted to educational public policies, giving greater recognition to the investment in educational aspects as a boost to the progress and development of the countries of Latin America. It is necessary to call on politicians and leaders to work for the common good of education by presenting plans, programs and public policy proposals that will strengthen public education in a timely manner.

Another key element in the higher education system is the students and their families. Higher education, unlike basic and secondary education, does not maintain a close relationship with the student’s family system, which is understandable to the extent that it does not admit children who depend on their tutors or caregivers, but responsible adults capable of making autonomous decisions. However, if we look at education as an integral system, it would also be necessary to take into account the family and social context of the students in their academic training, as these contexts are key to the performance of any student at any age. Therefore, to the extent that education focuses on the student as a subject of social transformation, it is also necessary to recognize the student as a subject immersed in a context that permeates him/her, recognizing him/her as the center of the teaching-learning process and as part of an integrality.

In order to achieve this integrality in the educational processes, universities should combine academic training with the humanistic training of their students, giving transcendence to the subject who knows his history and values and is committed to an attitude of solidarity

and social responsibility with his environment. Current educational systems require structural changes that allow them to adapt in a creative and successful way to the new political, social, educational and social realities of society and, more specifically, to the needs of students, developing in them the self-management of learning.

Sánchez Garza (2021) states that *“the process of self-management of learning demands that education should encourage in the individual the responsibility towards himself and at the same time towards others, in the same way it should guide the development of imagination and creativity both in the cognitive and social-cultural fields”*; in this way, in the knowledge and information societies, it is necessary to bet on the formation of autonomous students capable of having a positive impact on the development of the region. This is the case of Cuban universities that base their academic practice on *“the systemic and integrating character of the educational system and its necessary linkage with the needs of the country where the strengthening of educational work is the first and most important priority of the Cuban university, aimed at training comprehensive professionals who can fully assume the complex challenges of the present time and actively participate in the economic and social development of the country”* (CINDA, 2011).

The new social, economic and political realities require higher education to assume with greater commitment its transforming role and for this it is imperative that the educational offer is in line with the new realities, through new educational and pedagogical strategies such as the implementation of ICTs that allow reaching a greater number of students, i.e. it is necessary that in this educational innovation the universities contextualize their services to the needs of the student without ignoring their autonomy.

The new conditions challenge the world’s university centers and systems to be more flexible and demonstrate their capacity to develop programs adapted to social changes and economic needs, which implies a closer link with the world of work and the reduction of gaps between the supply and demand of high-level competencies (Unesco, 2009), thus presenting opportunities for the transformation of the region’s educational systems.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

After reviewing the trends and challenges of the educational systems in Latin America, it can be concluded that higher education is shown as a potential for local development and as a transforming political and social bet to which it is necessary to make critical and reflective readings that allow identifying, beyond the challenges, opportunities for improvement in order to have valid arguments to guide proposals for transforming higher education. Latin America has not been a world power in terms of education; however, it is facing an important period of opportunities that will position the countries of the region as key in the geopolitical dynamics, taking significant importance in the global context. The internationalization of education appears in the scenario as a bet that, promoted from the academy is having an important impulse compared to other years, at this point research emerges as an articulating axis of the internationalization processes since researchers have the opportunity to make known their studies in other universities and countries and in this way make knowledge more extensive.

It is important to mention that the role of teacher researchers in the resignification of higher education is fundamental, since it is precisely through research and the promotion of disciplines such as comparative education that it is possible to see educational systems in retrospective and prospective, identifying the aspects that influence them positively or negatively in order to have arguments that facilitate and support decision-making and the planning of actions aimed at strengthening local educational systems.

It is an opportunity for teachers and researchers to assume as a commitment the transformation and construction of new scenarios and new fair and equitable realities in higher education in the countries of the region and to promote from the academy the investigative and critical thinking in students and teachers, offering an education that forms responsible citizens in the local and global, educating in a practical way, not restrictive or repetitive; In other words, to innovate new ways of educating, inviting reflection and generating in academic scenarios, spaces that are oriented to criticism and the construction of autonomous thoughts.

The knowledge and information societies, immersed in a dynamic context, require seeing education as an issue that merits constant reflection not only on the part of students, but also on the part of teachers, governments and societies in general, directing these reflections not



only to discuss the way education is provided but also to propose strategies, plans, programs and public policies that have a significant impact on ensuring quality education, relevant and easily accessible to the population, from the recognition of the current social dynamics but especially from the recognition of the characteristics and needs of students and communities in general.

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