

Sad state of universities

BY JERRY HAAR

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If one were to describe the state of Latin America's universities today, a fitting motto might be: "An early 20th century higher education system for the early 21st century."

Falling behind Asia and Central Europe, Latin America's universities are not even ranked in the QS World University Rankings of the top 100 universities. Asia has 25 on the list.

To sustain and further the progress made since neoliberal economic reform -- and, at a minimum, not fall behind -- Latin America needs to address its higher-education shortcomings in five key areas:

- **Teaching body.** By any measure, most university faculties in Latin America come up short. Following outdated curricula, many professors lack master's or doctoral degrees, and because of the notoriously low pay and few full-time positions, most teach part time at several universities. Very few conduct quality research and are active in international academic associations in their field.
- **Infrastructure.** Latin American universities, particularly public ones, possess a physical plant characterized by architectural design akin to Mussolini's Italy in the 1930s or Central American government ministries in the 1940s. Decrepit, badly maintained and poorly equipped, the libraries especially are in pathetic condition. Internet connectivity? Dream on. Where it does exist, it is usually of the dial-up variety.
- **Governance.** The region's 19th-century higher-education "reforms" produced universities funded by the government but autonomous in their governance. Authorities at these independent fiefdoms control teaching, curriculum admission, hiring and promotion issues. Tuition is free or nominal at almost all public universities; however, student strikes are a tradition carried on even today.
- **Enrollment and the labor market.** Only 27 percent of university-age young people are enrolled in higher education -- less than half that of industrial nations and growing at a slower rate than Asia. Graduation rates hover around 25 percent, and few students graduate on time.
- **Research and innovation.** As a region, Latin America fares poorly, with an R&D-to-GDP ratio of 0.5 percent, which is a fifth of South Korea's, one-third of China's and half that of India. Brazil, Mexico and Argentina produce fewer patents in a year than my three graduate alma maters, Johns Hopkins, Columbia and Harvard. Budgets for R&D at universities come from public sources and rarely focus on commercialization. A scarcity of research personnel is another impediment.

Despite this gloomy assessment, there are some rays of hope. To stimulate R&D, multinational firms have become more active. Microsoft, IBM, Kodak, Telefónica and Hewlett-Packard (HP has

established nearly three dozen relationships in recent years) are among those companies partnering with the region's universities.

Another encouraging sign is the dramatic improvement of private universities, particularly church-related ones in the region, upgrading faculty, revamping curricula, and investing more resources in infrastructure and operations.

Higher education institutions are also partnering more with U.S., Canadian, and European universities. My own institution enjoys dual degree masters relationships with nine of the 10 top business schools rated in *América Economía* magazine. Engineering schools have also been active in co-venturing.

High commodity prices in many Latin American countries have propelled their recent growth and strengthened their currencies. But this will not last forever. We are living in the age of the knowledge economy. Latin America is not immune to these forces and trends.

If the region is to ride the wave of globalization and not be swept under, it must begin to transform its higher education system. Now.

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