

Post-secondary education in Ecuador:

Privatized and Elitist

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In 2008 in Ecuador, after the approval of a new magna carta for the country, there was debate over the government's willingness to create a new law that regulates post-secondary education. Many teachers and students from the universities as well as public servants from various sectors proposed that this new law be regulated based on the government's constitution. Respect for university autonomy, co-government and a real and viable budget as well as free post-secondary education were presented as the basis for the proposed regulation. The student movement achieved free post-secondary education only after many days of struggle in the streets. This after the pretense and proposals of many people and intellectuals from post-secondary education and also the corporate sector, that later appeared in strategic posts in the universities, only to deny this right.

This intention to set these bases for the law was shortlived. To the outside world, it appeared that the law was being debated within the four walls of the

university. However, the group of intellectuals connected to the new law were actually from the government. They had worked on this law and were the same people that belonged to the National Planning Secretary, SENPLADES, a body that established a Plan of Good Living for Ecuador. This plan held developmentalist positions and, above all, the intent to privatize that were hidden under the cloak of the new era, new period or modern Left. It sought to demobilize the university sectors that, months before, had struggled in the streets, 90 years from Cordoba, for the tenets of the reform, namely, autonomy, co-government, in defense of public university.

In June 2010, the government's project of the Constitutional Law of Post-Secondary Education was directly debated in the National Assembly without the presence of the university actors. It would be understood with its approval and official publication in October 2010 that it received different critiques: first of all because of its disastrous prior debate, and secondly for not having the participation of those who really know public post-secondary education in the country. This new law brought us several things including evaluation and

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categorization models for the university. This included those copied word for word from countries like Spain, Mexico, Argentina and Chile; an entrance and access system to the university based on an exam that can only be taken once upon finishing high school. With paying a fine, however, students could take the exam up to three times. Finally, they established exams of knowledge that were generated by a phenomenal market for the private sector. Dozens of exam preparation centres approached high school students to attend seminars, workshops or levelling out courses that would cost between \$300-600 and were two months long. These were the students who benefitted most from this admission system.

Various government agencies were created even though they were not included in the Constitution. The National Secretary for Post-Secondary Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, SENESCYT, a ministerial body, was established. To date this office designs the post-secondary education public policies, administers the entrance to public universities, establishes evaluation parameters, fines institutions and officials, passing through students, teachers and public servants, until it reaches the limit of generating legal mandatory fulfillment of post-secondary education in Ecuador. These are examples of how it oversteps the role for which it was created. It ends up being a supra ministry of post-secondary education with infinite power. This ministry ended a few months ago under the leadership of a terrible person for post-secondary education, Rene Ramírez Gallegos. This man was denounced dozens of times for various transgressions including nepotism, a salary that overcompensated his wife in a public university, the creation of universities without planning, public policies that benefitted the private education sector and for the amount of staff that entered this unconstitutional body. The structure also maintains two offices: the Council of Post-Secondary Education (CES) and the Council of Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CEAACES) that only has a specific sphere of action that it cannot surpass. It is, of course, directed by people close to the current regime (they are elected

by the National Electoral Council among supposedly well-known academics) and has no problem during times of electoral campaigns publishing favouritism for the government in power. These pronouncements lack leadership and decision in the face of the rest of the agencies that are dependent on the executive.

This has been the trajectory of post-secondary education in Ecuador these past almost seven years. The most reprehensible part of it has been the elimination of a fundamental right and principle of the Latin America and global alma mater, namely, the autonomous university. Contradicting the constitutional mandates they labelled it as responsible autonomy, with which they changed the aspect of post-secondary education. Firstly this allowed the revision, control, persecution and submission of Ecuadorian universities through its officials. Later, it permitted the inclusion of legislation (laws that regulate university actors from their entrance up to their evaluation) that lessens any indication of respect for autonomy which is the *raison d'être* of the university. Interventions are carried out in different post-secondary institutions that are critical or create social or scientific research that contradicts the government rhetoric of “growth”, with which they create a supposed fear or worry of university protest or critique.

The privatization of public post-secondary education in Ecuador, through the different legal reforms can be seen through the creation of four universities that are supposedly public. These universities receive funding from the state but are not publically accountable for their advances and development. They have the functionality of a public company, but actually operate according to their own statutes. They allow the entrance of high school students through different ways, give exorbitant salaries to their officials, and finally, enjoy a rigid and personal autonomy that does not allow the public to know what it really does as a post-secondary institution. These four universities are YACHAY, IKIAM University, University of the Arts, and University of Education. They receive close to \$1.2 billion dollars which is the same budget allotted to Ecuador's 36 public universities. While their

websites describe some of their activities, they are not transparent about their budgets nor the law orders. They are managed in the style of a company. The other commercialization of post-secondary education is the permanent handing over of public funds to private universities or so-called co-financed private ones. These universities obtain funds from student enrolment that in some cases surpasses \$1,000 dollars per month. They then also receive funds directly from the state through the so-called pre-allocations and the permanent fund for university and polytechnic development, FOPEDEUPO, which was created in 1998. The goal of the state is to allocate resources through the economic excess from taxes and of the main export product which is national oil. Unfortunately these allocations have not changed, nor will they change. The public institutions are considered the same as the co-financed ones in this fund allocation which diminishes the total value that they receive each year. Above all this violates the constitutional and legal mandate. For more than two years, the budget has not increased in line with GDP. This has suffocated various public post-secondary institutions.

This budget restriction also translates into the same allocation for the quota for thousands of high school students that apply, the lack of training to the university classes and the low growth in infrastructure and technology that is very necessary for the development of scientific research.

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census of Ecuador (INEC), the enrolment rate in post-secondary institutions has decreased by almost 4 percentage points between 2012 and 2016, going from 30% to 26.6%. By contrast, the enrolment rate in private universities or co-financed ones has increased to 39% since 2012. Hence, the majority of high school students that do not enter public university enrol in private institutions, as long as they have enough money to do so. The costs can range from \$700 USD per semester up to \$2300 USD in some universities. For example, one private university, called the University of the Americas, UDLA, went from 4000 students in 2010 to close to 11,000 students in 2016. This increase is all the more dramatic when compared with the more than 600,000 high school students that, in 10 years, have



“Students manifest their refusal to privatize higher education”.

Photo: John Guevara. El telégrafo



“Slogan to stop the increase in the transportation rate”. Photo Amparito Rosero. El Universo

not succeeded in entering post-secondary education. Each year, between 120,000 and 125,000 high school students apply for the university “quota” through the entrance exam. The Ecuadorian university offers only 57,000 to 60,000 entrance spots. This means that each semester half of the high school student applicants are left out. These numbers indicate that in these last seven years since Ecuador’s new Post-Secondary Education Law (LOES), a fundamental right to free access to free post-secondary education has actually been reduced.

Final Reflection

I believe that if important changes or reforms are not carried out to the LOES, the situation of public post-secondary education in Ecuador will face a great setback. This would allow for the growth of the elitism that impacts university entrance or access, mobility, finishing school, distribution of resources, free education, and above all of autonomy. These fundamental principles have been infringed upon since the creation of the legal norms that generated this process. These are different

from the government’s proposals in these years. Of course there have been changes but these are directed from a commercial point of view and lead to the privatization of Ecuador’s post-secondary education. For example, when it comes to the categorization of universities, the private ones are in first place in the academic ranking that were created by the government. There are easier ways to enter private education than public education as there are more obstacles to entering public education and the enrolment rate is lower. Finally, it seems fateful to review the dozens of youth that without entering public universities have to look for work or face under-employment which has super high rates in Ecuador. At the same time, this generates an environment of passiveness in academia and of the Ecuadorian University. Instead of being critical and a generator of solutions to Ecuador’s great social and economic problems, academia ends up being one more body of the state’s structure, submitted to the designs of the government in power.