

The Impact of Demand-Absorbing Universities in Mexico's Higher Education System

Lucia Quintero-Re

ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to ongoing debate on the role that the private sector plays on the massification of Mexico's higher education system. It focuses specifically on demand-absorbing institutions and the changes that their proliferation pose to the private and public balance. The latter which are relatively new, charge low fees and are perceived to be of low quality are on the one hand identified as a mayor driving force for massification and on the other as being a risky quality concern for the system. They have been derogatorily labelled as "patito" universities (literally this means little duck but figuratively it means of inferior or fake quality) and they have been left out of official public policy initiatives.

This paper reports on the most significant findings reached by a case study of the higher education system of a northern industrial state in Mexico. This qualitative research compared the three major types of tertiary institutions in Mexico: public, private elite and private demand-absorbing in order to analyse the role of the latter within the higher education system. Through the analysis of face to face semi-structured interviews with ten higher education authorities the research studied how demand-absorbing institutions interact and are perceived by the public and elite universities.

The findings indicate that that the system is perceived to be explicitly divided by socio-economic groups and that only demand-absorbing universities are purposely incorporating non-traditional students into higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions around the world, in every 'economic' type of country, are experiencing a massification of their student numbers. In fact, the end of an elitist tertiary system is considered an expected development of a "properly developing national society" (Schofer and Meyer, 2005, pp 27). However numerical expansion is beset by qualitative tensions, strains and challenges that policymakers need to engage with when developing higher education policies.

Over the last 30 years, the Mexican higher education system experienced a colossal increment in enrolment of over 800% (SEP 2007). The massification of its student numbers has substantially shaken and modified its functions and stakeholders. And whilst justifications to expand the system, relate positively both to economic development and social mobility the ways in which the benefits of higher education are in reality widened have caused difficulties relating to quality, fairness and the essence of what a higher education system should look like.

Not surprisingly for a Latin-American country, Mexico's massification is fuelled as much by the system's private as by its public sector. From 1980 to 2005 the tertiary education grew by 163%, and 43% of that growth was due to increments in the private enrolment (SEP, 2007). In the 2004/05 school year the private higher education system catered to 30.6% of the students.

A closer analysis of the private sector shows that it is not homogenous and that certain types of institutions are expanding more than others. Typologies of Mexican higher education institutions identify a rapid expansion of a group of universities with the following characteristics: private, small, inexpensive, new, demand-absorbing, low-profile, oriented towards teaching and possessing low-levels of academic and organisational complexity (Izquierdo, 2004; Levy, 1986; Silas, 2005). These institutions, hence forth referred to as demand-absorbing, are currently leading the expansion of private enrolments. They have been identified on the one hand as a mayor driving force for massification with the possibility to widen participation and on the other as being a quality threat for the system.

They have been derogatorily labelled as "patito" universities (literally this means little duck but figuratively it means of inferior or fake quality) and they have been broadly criticised in newspapers over the last seven years for committing educational fraud. They have been portrayed as having below minimal quality and thus prying to make a quick profit from poor students left out of the public system. Upheaval has been expressed by all actors. The FIMPES (Mexican Federation of Private Universities) claimed that the existence of 660 private institutions discredited the private educational system and they demanded the government to create and implement clearer quality measures (Libertas, 2004). Authorities of the public system have criticised the government for dealing with these universities as a consumer market problem through the *Office of the Federal Prosecutor for the Consumer* (PROFECO) rather than as an educational issue through the ministry of education (Cruz, 2006). However what is exactly feared has been very vague and anecdotal in both media and academic coverage. Moreover simply attacking demand-absorbing universities without just cause could negatively affect the quantitative progress of expansion and access that has painstakingly been reached in Mexico.

At this moment it is significant to note that the demand-absorbing institutions are generally registered as "sociedades civiles", or for-profit. Whereas private elite institutions are usually registered as "asociacion civiles" legal entities that must invest back their earnings. Nevertheless the for or not for profit distinction is not clear cut as most private institutions registered as "asociacion civil" find legal ways of having some parts of the university registered as "sociedades civiles".

Against this background this paper contributes to ongoing debate on demand-absorbing institutions and on the changes that their proliferation pose to the private and public balance. It reports on the most significant findings reached by a case study of the higher education system of a northern industrial state in Mexico. This qualitative research compared the three major types of tertiary institutions in Mexico: public, private elite and private demand-absorbing in order to analyse the role of the latter within the higher education system. This was done through the analyses of face to face semi-structured interviews with

one higher education government official and nine university authorities, three from each of the major types of universities. The research studied how demand-absorbing institutions interact and are perceived by the public and elite universities in order to give an improved understanding and more holistic view of the Mexican higher education system.

Moreover this paper seeks to shed light on an increasingly important higher education actor that has been overlooked by government policymakers. The paper's motivation follows Levy's advice,

If public policy seeks to shape private roles more or more thoughtfully than it has, it should proceed in large part from an understanding of the realities through which private roles have emerged, mixing this with feasible ideas about how to modify, limit, or promote certain aspects (2002, p. 21).

MASSIFICATION AND MEXICO

One of the first descriptions of massification is Martin Trow's 1973 interpretative framework with which he suggested that systems of higher education transition from elite, to mass and onto universal models (Trow, 2006). The driving force of the framework is numerical. An elite system caters up to 15% of the relevant age group, a mass system caters to 16 to 50% and a universal system includes over 50% (Trow, 2006). However massification is more than just expansion. Trow suggests that shifting into a different higher education phase numerically brings about a qualitative change in most aspects of the tertiary structure. An elite system provides privileged settings of socialization, encourages the pursuit of ambition and fosters self-confidence in its graduates. Meanwhile a mass system still prepares the elite but does so more broadly, focusing on the transmission of technical skills. On the other hand universal higher education is concerned with training the whole population to adapt to a society characterised by fast social and technological changes. Another way to illustrate the changes between phases is through the difference in attitude with respect to access: from seeing higher education as a privilege of birth or talent (elite), to considering it a right for those with sufficient qualifications (mass) to ultimately viewing it as an obligation of the middle classes (universal).

However in many systems it is noticeable that despite quantitative growth, a system can still act as in the elite phase (keeping high standards, selectivity, etc). Scott (1995) suggests that massification has occurred through an "upward march of credentialism rather than in terms of a fundamental shift in social attitudes towards higher education across the whole community" (p.23). He suspects this because expansion has been concentrated mostly in certain types of institutions (usually new, second-tier ones) and universities have not expanded by tapping into different types of students but by exploiting the same student constituencies.

Scott's account of massification is fitting to the Mexican experience. Situated numerically in a mass phase according to Trow's framework, the system caters to 26% of the age group (SEP, 2007). Nevertheless, as Scott suggested, it does not demonstrate a qualitative linear development. Its progress towards possessing massified or universal characteristics is much more erratic. In many instances although higher education expanded and universities

were conceptually given social and democratic functions they did not fundamentally change to realise them (Lorey, 1993).

Furthermore in the Mexican case it is difficult to talk about a homogenous system. Unregulated expansion of institutions, hasty growth and convenient historical arrangements between government and powerful social groups (Rubio, 1994) makes the notion of groups of institutions acting as unarticulated subsystems a more fitting description. The fact that Mexico's public-private distinction is so strong, with no central authority able to dictate how these should work together, seems to have allowed Trow's elite and mass phases to exist simultaneously in one system through different groups of institutions. Private elite institutions continue to function as an elite higher education system and public universities as a massified one.

This paper will explore through the aforementioned research's finding whether the newest actor, demand-absorbing universities, have followed suit and are acting as a separate system with characteristics of Trow's universal phase.

METHODOLOGY

The research project from which the data for this paper is taken used a case study approach and conducted qualitative fieldwork in a northern state of Mexico during the months of March and April 2007. The state, which for ethical considerations must remain anonymous, is referred to as the state of Desierto. The data was collected through recorded semi-structured face-to-face interviews with senior administrators of the institutions. The university sample was made up of three authorities belonging to a public university, three to private demand-absorbing institutions and three to a private elite one. The governmental authority interviewed was a former Mexican Secretary (Minister) of Higher Education. Whilst the authorities in the public and private elite universities all came from the same institution those in the demand-absorbing sample were from three different institutions. This is due to the low level of organisational complexity characteristic of these universities.

The demand-absorbing institutions will be referred to as the Open, the Big and the Specialised universities. The Open University allowed students the possibility not to attend classes and just present the exams, there are no entrance exams and there are night schedules for all degrees. The Big University also offered night schedules and was exempt of entrance exams. It had 256 classrooms, 20 laboratories and 10 libraries. The Specialized University was the smallest in the sample and it only offered four bachelor degrees and one MA degree.

The interviews purposely sought opinions instead of facts. The questions that were planned were general ones about the purpose of higher education, the problems faced, the student body and the future developments. Emerging from these, spontaneous questions were then posed to the interviewee.

Interviews were then analysed by identifying patterns and recurrent themes that could serve as coding categories. The following list of themes was extrapolated:

- Origin of University
- Characteristic of University
- Expansion of Higher Education
- Function of Higher Education
- Function of the Particular University
- Position of the University
- Private versus Public
- Types of Students
- Future of University
- Finance
- Problems

All the interview responses were then coded through these themes using the computer software NVivo. The analysis consisted in comparing and contrasting responses for the coded themes between the four different types of interviewees. This paper discusses the most significant outcomes of this analysis.

RESULTS

One of the most important findings from the research is that Desierto's higher education system is perceived as being recognisably segmented by socio-economic classes by the three types of higher education institutions. The Elite universities intend to cater to the upper middle class, Public to middle class and Demand-Absorbing to lower middle class.

All three respondents from the Elite University identified that they catered to the upper middle classes and that the lower classes were not significantly represented. Their students are described by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor as "a very particular segment of society, one which is very ambitious and that in fact is even seeking for certain prestige". They did not identify them as the smartest or most talented students but rather as those with sufficient capacity both academically and economically. They even stated that a big majority of their students were more interested in the social environment of the university rather than in its academic rigor. Elite authorities intended to change this attitude not by replacing these types of students but by channelling more academically oriented students in hopes of influencing the majority.

The Public University was the most ambiguous of the sample in regards to stating its students' socio-economic composition. The Pro Vice-Chancellor of Students identified it as largely of a middle class composition but recognised that some degrees presented either a larger composition of upper class or others of lower class. Nevertheless her description inclined towards the upper rather than the lower end of the middle class spectrum. The Pro-Vice Chancellor of Research criticised the perception that they did not cater to the upper classes,

It is not true that there is a segregation, that the people economically wealthy, that the rich don't come to the University. The people with talent, those that have the abilities and that know what they need, know that they will find in the university.

However he then follows to say that this type of student was a minority which they wished to enlarge. Finally the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Development identified the socio-economic status as lower middle class with very few upper class students.

These contradictions bring forth two problems when talking about class in Mexico and in higher education. First, identifying class is done comparatively and although there might be mention of lower classes attending higher education these do not refer to the real Mexican lower classes. The division of classes is done from that segment of the population that managed to finish high school and these already represent privileged classes. Therefore the socio-economic description of the university's population depends on whether a micro or a macro perspective is taken. This was not an issue for the Elite University because it caters to both the upper part of the segment that goes to higher education and to the upper segment of society as a whole.

The second problem is that acknowledging a lack of upper class students is like acknowledging less prestige. This is implied because only those students with economic power are really in a position to choose a higher education institution. If students do not choose the Public institution it is perceived to be because the paying option is better. So if by speaking about the socio-economic composition of the students the interviewees felt that they were talking about their institution's quality a mixed response was to be expected.

In any case the responses differ sufficiently to indicate a change of socio-economic position from that of the students in the Elite institution. The responses also show that the students do not in their majority belong to the lower classes because they were described as students that attended higher education as a natural next step.

Demand-absorbing institutions, like the Elite institution, were very straightforward and congruent in their answer. They proudly described their student population as belonging to the lower classes. The most recurrent way of describing them was as working students. This does not refer to the English connotation of working class, but rather it refers to students that cannot study without working at the same time. It includes students that have already been working and wish to come back to retake their studies and students that need to work in order to sustain themselves and their families while studying. Hence they tend to be older and to have a family of their own. They are also poorer or as the Vice-Chancellor of the Open University called them, "The destitute, the bulk of our society".

Although the socio-economic differentiation of students could have been inferred through the variation in fees between university groups the segmentation featured in this finding becomes much more significant since it is overtly stated by the institutions' authorities. The open acknowledgement of this phenomenon could imply that the segmentation is not only a consequence of fees and social capital but also an approved and conscious result. Even if a quantitative study of the socio-economic composition of students revealed that the variations in class were not strikingly different the fact that university authorities believe that they cater to a distinctive socio-economic group is still significant.

It could indicate a number of different things about Desierto's higher education system and maybe also of Mexico's system in general. It could signify that Mexican universities form their identity through a close relationship to the socio-economic status of their students and that the Mexican society approves of class divisions in education.

The second finding adds to the description of those who attend demand-absorbing universities. It was found that demand-absorbing institutions in the sample were responsible for inciting the participation of non-traditional students in higher education.

All authorities of demand-absorbing institutions emphasised the sacrifice, effort and perseverance their students demonstrated by studying. "We have students that come do a term and then they leave to earn some money for the next year's term. They have a lot of perseverance" (Vice-Chancellor, Big University). They were very proud mentioning the low class origins and the difficulties their students faced whilst studying. Through these traits they see their students as individuals who are truly motivated to study and strong enough to overcome their obstacles. This distinguishes their students from those in other types of university.

It is costing him and therefore he cannot waste his time in silly things. He is dedicated to studying and he has to learn because it is costing him. What's more, many of them work so they are people who appreciate much more than someone that has been given everything by his parents or that is economically at ease

(Vice-Chancellor, Big University).

From these descriptions we identify that the demand that needed to be absorbed consisted not only of those with insufficient money for Elite institutions or those rejected from the Public institution but it also consisted of those that needed a different type of institution, one that catered to the needs of a working, lower class population. In other words these institutions not only absorb demand but they create new one.

The interviewees described this student as an atypical student (older, poorer, worker) that wished to improve him or herself through higher education. They are students that need flexibility, low costs, help obtaining and maintaining jobs, more personalised attention, no entrance exams, night classes and open schedules. Demand-absorbing institutions provide this in different ways. For example the Big University created a program that guaranteed its students paid internships throughout their studies. The Open University used an open and online system where students did not need to attend classes. The Specialised University offered a more personalised student-teacher relationship to help in the student's progression. They all offer night schedules but most importantly they all understand and are attentive to the need to be at work or in the home. "We understand that the students in undergraduate degrees are workers and that they also need...they need to be in their home, with their family, they are parents of young children" (Vice-Chancellor, Specialised University).

Interest in these types of students was only shown by demand-absorbing type of institutions. The Elite institution was very clear and focused in serving the upper middle classes, "The educational model of our university is very expensive and it only has success where there is a very powerful and important middle class" (Deputy Vice-Chancellor). The Public

institutions also showed no immediate interest in expanding to incorporate these types of students. On the contrary they indicated a wish to be able to contract and be more selective to capable, talented students, "For this University the admittance criteria should be capability and knowledge, it should be the only admittance criteria" (Pro Vice-Chancellor of Research). Additionally only Demand-absorbing institutions are intentionally planning to expand their enrolment numbers indefinitely.

This finding could imply that another possible driving force for the creation and expansion of demand-absorbing institutions is that as enrolment grew and credentials became more important, possessing a higher education diploma also became a priority for non-traditional students. Demand-absorbing institutions seem to have responded to their needs by offering different academic practices and standards and thus allowing them to incorporate into the realms of higher education.

It is relevant to point out that debate about widening participation with respect to non-traditional students such as that present in the UK does not exist in Mexican higher education discourse. Therefore this finding is very significant as it indicated that non-traditional students exist in Mexico's system even if there has not been a government policy to incorporate them. Appropriate pedagogies and structures for the successful incorporation of these types of students would be a very important topic for future research and an essential discussion to evaluate the quality in demand-absorbing institutions.

This finding also suggests that the Mexican system is incorporating non-traditional students by creating separate institutions for them rather than changing already established universities to respond to their needs. This portrays Desierto's tertiary system as a covert diversified model because although it has different institutions serving different purposes they are all under the same title of "University". This is happening through private independent initiatives rather than through a planned governmental proposal. Whether this is an efficient, desirable and sustainable way to structure the system would also need to be discussed in future research.

With relation to how the different types of institutions perceive Desierto's higher education system it was found that the Public University and the Government Authority did not significantly incorporate and consider Demand-absorbing universities as relevant actors of the system. On the other hand Elite and Demand-absorbing institutions considered all three types of universities as important actors.

In the interviews with Public authorities even though they were informed about the research topic they did not consider demand-absorbing institutions as an actor within the system unless prompted. The interviewees used the term private universities exclusively for Elite ones. They also did not consider them as an option for students that did not obtain a place in the Public University. For those students they recommended either presenting the entrance exam in the spring term when there were less applicants or studying an associate degree. The Pro Vice-Chancellor of Development even thought they were not authorised universities and acknowledged that she did not know much about them. "Actually I don't know what type of students they have, or their quality, or their programs. I do not know". When asked why she thought students went to demand-absorbing institutions she presented

the decision as an act of desperation, "I think that as a mother if your child is not accepted (to the Public University), the world falls on your shoulders and that is why they choose those institutions".

The former Minister of Higher Education also evidenced that the government did not know what demand-absorbing universities were like. After the interviewee explained that the government was being successful in attacking them through a media campaign he said, "Nevertheless we are not very clear on what a *patito* university really means. This is a problem."

He expressed the belief that the improvement in quality that public universities were experiencing would bring back students to public institutions and therefore stop private growth. Nonetheless he did not identify the Public's present inability to cope with demand or the different needs a massified or universal higher education student body faces. The former Minister's emphasis on quality rather than on coverage and his view that private demand-absorbing growth would face a standstill through improvement in public quality seems to show a lack of awareness of the opportunities provided by demand-absorbing institutions.

In contrast, the Elite institutions were always monitoring the demand-absorbing institution's growth even though like Public ones, they were not presently losing students to them. They were aware that in the future demand-absorbing universities would probably, by means of a chain reaction, affect their student demand. They even identified a strategy used by another Elite university of creating a demand-absorbing franchise of the Elite university in order to deter stronger national and international demand-absorbing institutions of establishing in the area. They also believed that these types of universities had a positive effect despite the fact they recognised they were of a lower quality.

Well its people that any other way would not have higher education. I think there is place for everything; if the Public University cannot give them access, well then there should be other options. Even if they are of a lower quality it is good

(Pro Vice-Chancellor of Development, Elite University).

Demand-absorbing institutions also expressed a vision about themselves in relation to the other two types of universities. They emphasised that they had won and gained a place in the system. They identified that they did not compete with Elite or Public universities with regards to prestige but they saw themselves as the middle option of two extremes. They also saw themselves as contributors to society and to the higher education system. The Big University pointed out to the number of years and number of students as evidence that they were an institution that was going to last. "We have been here for far too many years for it all to be coincidence. There are thousands of graduates on the streets working that have the name of the school and we are very proud of that" (Vice-Chancellor). The Specialised University emphasised how the higher education MA they were offering was responding to society's need for better educated teachers. So even though the Public University and the government are unacquainted or exclude demand-absorbing institutions, these together with Elite universities, acknowledge their roles as actors of the system.

Therefore the interviews from the Public and Government authorities seem to evidence a lesser degree of cooperation towards a collective idea of a higher education system than the other two types of institutions' authorities. This might indicate that future efforts to integrate the system and more importantly to create public policies for its development will require for both public universities and government authorities to incorporate the system's newest actor despite the consequences and conflicts it might inflict in their own ideologies.

CONCLUSIONS

In addition to the aforementioned findings the interviews were analysed with respect to the different phases of Trow's framework: elite, mass and universal. This exercise showed that the three groups of universities presented strong, if not complete divisions with respect to phases. The Elite University still held most characteristics of an elite phase. The Public institution was most similar to the massified phase and Demand-absorbing institutions were the only ones that possessed characteristics corresponding to Trow's universal phase. This could indicate that as the system massified numerically, it promoted the creation of three separate systems represented by the three different types of universities. This would mean that there exists significant difference between the types of universities with regards to function, ideologies and purpose. If these key differences are simply ignored strains could increase and impair the system's expansion and progress.

A crucial debate that these findings uncover is that the demand-absorbing institutions' function of incorporating and adapting higher education to the needs of non-traditional working students is being regarded as conflictive or as the equivalent of bad quality education. The elite type of university did not object but it appears that the public and governmental authorities did not view it as a valid function. If it is believed that adapting higher education to the needs of non-traditional students should not be a function of a university then future public policies might eventually officially separate demand-absorbing universities from more academic and research orientated institutions.

This difference in function between the types of universities is also revealing with regards to the implementation of other educational policies currently in place. For example since 1994 the Mexican government has tried to implement "community" or "two-year" colleges to cater to the working lower class students. This has not been successful as degrees awarded by "community" colleges are not regarded as "real" degrees by the Mexican students and employees. However the research's findings by revealing that demand-absorbing institutions are catering to non-traditional students could suggest that these universities' growth could be sabotaging the government's efforts to consolidate associate degrees since they in reality offer a similar degree to that of colleges but under the title of a bachelor degree. This could also indicate that Mexico has a covert diversified model of higher education, one with different types of qualifications all under the same title of "undergraduate" degree.

By not openly discussing the essence and shape of such a model, public policy limits its reach and effectiveness. Massification in enrolment is definitely occurring but how it happens, what it looks like and what it should achieve seem to be out of the Mexican

policymakers' control. There is a lack of a "spinal column" (OECD cited in Gonzalez, 2007) to articulate the whole of Mexican tertiary education. But perhaps as the system is further strained by the growth of demand-absorbing institutions and "opening a private university is as easy as opening a tortilleria" (Levy, 1986, p.136) authorities will be forced to engage in a holistic debate about the desired structure for Mexico's higher education system.

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Correspondence

Lucia Quintero-Re, luciaqui@gmail.com