

ECUADOR

Neoliberalism meets populism in HE reforms

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In the decade since Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa declared a 'citizens' revolution', the South American country has undergone a radical transformation of its higher education system. According to the United Nations-backed Global University Network for Innovation, or GUNI, the reforms are the most ambitious in Latin America and rank high among higher education innovations worldwide. They are also noteworthy for combining populist and neoliberal policies.

It's not necessarily what you would expect from a self-styled 'socialist revolutionary' leader and a close ally of the late presidents Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro. However, Correa, who holds a PhD in economics from the University of Illinois in the United States, has made improving both the quality and equity of the country's higher education system a centrepiece of his administration – albeit not without controversy.

Today, Ecuador spends 2% of its gross domestic product on higher education, by far the highest proportional spending in Latin America and significantly higher than the average of OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – member countries.

Tertiary enrolment has doubled over the

past decade to reach more than 700,000, with the biggest increases among low-income and minority students. Since 2010, the government has funded nearly 20,000 study-abroad scholarships for mostly postgraduate students in the STEM – science, technology, engineering and mathematics – fields, in a bid to raise the level of teaching and research in those areas.

Quality and access

The changes are the result of the new higher education law passed in 2010. The law made higher education free (previously, annual fees ran in the hundreds or thousands of dollars per year) and implemented new quality-control systems, such as requiring all senior professors and university presidents to hold PhDs by this year.

Since 2010, the government has shut 17 private universities and quadrupled the proportion of university professors with PhDs, from 27% to 80%, says René Ramírez Gallegos, the country's secretary for higher education, science, technology and innovation.

It has also implemented affirmative action policies for indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian minorities in both public and private institutions. While those groups represent 15% of the country's 14 million people, they have traditionally been a tiny minority of university students. With universities now required to reserve 10% of their spots for these students, their share has more than doubled. And the proportion of first-generation students has quadrupled since 2010, says Ramírez.

Sanctions and fines

The higher education secretary was in Mexico recently to talk about one of the

boldest steps by the Correa administration: the new Economy and Social Knowledge law passed last fall. The law, known colloquially as the Ingenuity Code – *Código de Ingenios* – imposes strict sanctions for biopiracy, in a bid to reduce the exploitation of indigenous knowledge and native species by pharmaceutical companies and international research institutions.

The law also empowers the government to impose fines or strip the licences of universities that operate for-profit – the first country in the region to do so.

As is the case with several Latin American countries – most notably Chile and Colombia – for-profit higher education is banned under Ecuadorian law. But previously the government had no mechanism for enforcing its own legislation.

The government has identified five such institutions that are illegally sending money abroad, including to offshore tax havens, Ramírez said. Among them is the University of the Americas, or UDLA, one of the largest private universities in the country, which is part of US-based Laureate International Universities.

Laureate – the largest for-profit network of higher education institutions in the world, with some 70 universities in 25 countries – has recently come under fire in Chile for violating that country's ban on for-profit higher education. But unlike Ecuador, Chilean law provides few options for punishing institutions that flout the law.

“It's pathetic the way the university does business,” Ramírez said of the UDLA. “Now, with this law, we can go in and investigate and take action.”

Controversy

Not surprisingly, the new reforms have

sparked considerable controversy. University students and professors have taken to the streets to protest against the 2010 higher education law, which they claim threatens university autonomy by increasing government controls over the sector. Academics and rectors have also criticised the new PhD requirements, noting that only a handful of Ecuadorian universities even offer doctoral degrees.

Another flashpoint was the government's decision to deny accreditation to the Amawtay Wasi Intercultural University in 2013. The institution, one of a raft of universities in the region that cater to indigenous students, failed the government accreditation process several years in a row. Critics argue that the university's forced closure violates the principle of 'pluriculturalism' enshrined in the 2008 Constitution.

However, Ramírez contends that the measures are necessary in order to improve the quality of education in the country. In the case of Amawtay Wasi, he says the institution operated out of "purely political motives" and provided a "miserable level of education, even by its own indigenous logic".

He may well be right, although it may not be solely the university's fault. Many intercultural universities in the region are sorely underfunded, resulting in a second-class education for already marginalised populations.

Still, the Ecuadorian government's efforts to improve both the quality and equity of the higher education system should be applauded. So should its crackdown on for-profit institutions, whose dishonest and predatory business practices have been amply documented and penalised in the United States. Other countries in the region should take note of Ecuador's example.

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