

# 11

## **Equity in Mexico's Higher Education**

### **Profound Gaps in Access and Expectations from Different Public and Private Universities**

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#### **Introduction**

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Mexico is a country with more than 120 million of inhabitants. It is the eleventh most populous country, whose Northern border with the USA, the world's largest economy worldwide, brings to the forefront the critical issue of how to expand the number of students in higher education. Although this issue should be a priority in the national strategic agenda for bolstering the economy, authorities have lagged behind the goal of achieving universal access to tertiary level. In fact, during the 1980s Mexican authorities faced a dilemma as regards the best strategies for improving the languished national economy, in front of an international debt crisis. While Mexico opted for the sale of petroleum products neglecting other interesting sources of revenues, Korea, with similar economic indicators at that particular time, bet on education. Currently, Mexico's gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education hardly accounts for 32.8% while the one of Korea is 97-98%. In the economic context, Korea enjoys acceptable standards among the OCED countries, where Mexico tends to rank at the bottom.

An important lesson that can be drawn from this comparison is that Mexico's strategic plans for beefing up its position, in front of the uneven relation with the USA, have to include the issues of access, equity, as well as quality for strengthening higher education nationwide. Furthermore, there is an additional factor that has to do with the named "demographic bonus" meaning that national productive activities rely mostly on young population. Demographic studies as regards the composition of the national inhabitants point to the fact that the national median age is 26, i.e., half of the Mexicans are younger than 26. So, this population is aimed at contributing to the economic growth with their knowledge, abilities, talents and skills. Young students are supposed to play a critical role toward strengthening the knowledge society. But this promising situation is not forever and indeed has a "date of caducity", since in a few years the demographic profile will change.

The following study will briefly describe the historical growth of tertiary level, the current structure of Mexico's higher education, as well as those factors influential in shaping it; the current higher education enrolment, emphasizing critical aspects of the gross enrolment rate for different geographical zones in Mexico and also for public and private institutions. This section will describe the main tendencies in the composition of enrolments by disciplines. Finally, this study will shed light on some critical issues related to equity/inequity on higher education, particularly those factors related to gender, urban-rural, and socio-economic layers shaping access to higher education.

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### The Historical Growth of Tertiary Level

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Figure 11.1 describes the growth of student enrolments during almost twenty-three years in Mexico. Nevertheless, the steady rise in enrolments, to date Mexico has hardly accounted for a top of 30% of its pertinent age group (19 to 23 years old) in tertiary education (Muñoz Izquierdo and Silva Laya 2013:92).

According to the Martin Trow's classification (2001) of tertiary education systems as regards the percentage of age group with access to this level, Mexico fell into the "elite" category up to the end of the 1960s, since less than 15% of the student population entered universities. "Only 2.7% of the pertinent age group had access to higher education in 1960, and this percentage was twofold over 1970" (Levy 1986: 255). During those years, it was normal that students left their native cities to enter tertiary institution mostly in a handful of few big cities (Mexico, Guadalajara, and Monterrey). The transition towards "mass" higher education (15% to 50% of the pertinent age group) took place in the 1990s after the country overcame the serious economic crisis in the 1980s (better known as the "lost decade") causing a stagnation of enrolments.

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enrolments difficult for new type of institutions. Thus, authorities along with employers must strengthen favourable conditions in the workplace for hiring graduated students of novel institutions. As the saying goes “it takes two to tango”: if the labour market fails to meet expectations for graduate students, do not blame universities for creating unemployed students.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Mexico’s minimum wages tend to vary slightly depending on economical and geographical regions. Four minimum wages in 2015 are equivalent to monthly 520 US dollars (yearly 6,237 US dollars).

<sup>2</sup> The previous waves were the religious-elite and the secular-elite private institutions.

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