

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN MEXICO

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I will begin by saying that today teaching and research in institutions of higher learning are widely recognized as fundamental tasks of society. In a globalized world, where knowledge and information are increasing by leaps and bounds, no country can aspire to progress, culture and democracy without an up-to-date system of higher education which can meet its people's expectations and aspirations in terms of schooling. In the pertinent specialized literature, a close correlation has been shown between investment in this educational level and socio-economic development, particularly in countries like ours, judging by the experience of others in similar circumstances. We Mexicans are at a crossroads today: either we dedicate effort and resources to higher education, or we run the risk of being left behind in globalization.

For the reader to better appreciate these ideas, we will present information about the overall panorama of higher education, first looking at the inequalities among countries and then looking at those in Mexico. The UNESCO document "Policy for Change and Development of Higher Education" explains the tendency to profound inequality prevailing worldwide.

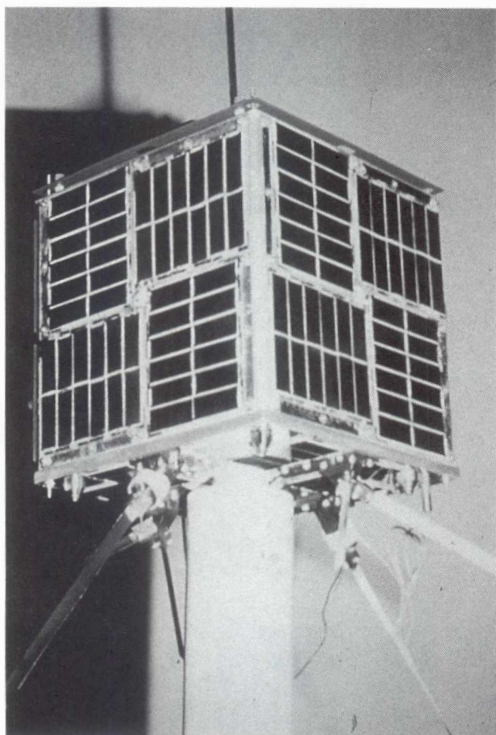
Between 1960 and 1980 world enrollment in higher education among 18- to 23-year-olds increased, but between 1980 and 1991, it tended to stabilize at around 18.8 percent.

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In Mexico's southern states (Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero) very few children ever get to the university.



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In the highly developed countries, the enrollment almost trebled in the 30 years between 1960 and 1990, covering 40.2 percent of demand, while in the non-developed countries, it only doubled, covering about 14.1 percent. For the year 2025, the document projects that the gap between the rate of coverage of the demand in these two kinds of countries will be even larger, with an almost

50 percent rate in the former and a substantial decline in the latter countries that will situate them with around 10 percent coverage. If knowledge and human resources produced in universities have become crucial in worldwide stratification, countries like ours will be in an increasingly disadvantageous relative position without having individuals educated for creating, receiving and applying the latest science and technology.

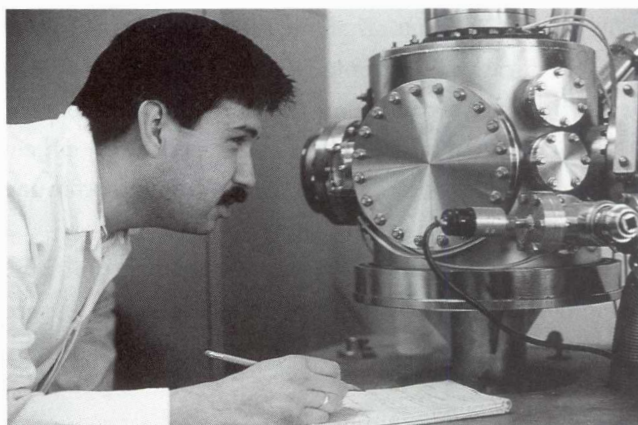
In Mexico, national coverage of higher education for young people between 20 and 24 years of age was 13.8 percent in 1990: this is below the average for the non-developed countries. Despite recent expansion of opportunities in higher education, in 1990 our country continued to show enormous inequalities. A case in point are the results of a comparative regional analysis carried out by the UNAM's Education and Employment Program. The study shows that Mexico's south central states (Mexico City, the State of Mexico and Morelos) concentrate 37 percent of the country's inhabitants 18 and over with four years of higher education and 40.1 percent of those with graduate work; this is the highest index of concentration relative to the demographic base in the country. By contrast, the Southern Pacific region (Chiapas, Guerrero and

Oaxaca) has only 4.7 and 3.4 percent of that population respectively, with the lowest concentration vis-à-vis the total number of people in that age group.

Let's look at another side of the problem. According to the 1990 census, Mexico had a population of 81.1 million people, of whom 4.1 million had at least one year of higher education. Less than half of those (1.9 million) had finished four years or more. Therefore, higher education continued to be profoundly selective.

In other words, in the last decade of the twentieth century, in the midst of globalization, Mexico has a very small base of highly qualified personnel with which to achieve greater competitiveness and urgently needs to rapidly train quality professionals. It must also satisfy the increasing demand for higher education stemming partially from demographics and partially from the economic crunch faced by middle-class families who continue to see a university education as a means of solving employment problems and access to a better standard of living.

With a social coverage of higher education that has remained constant for at least the last ten years, we need an educational policy which will broaden out the opportunities for access to higher education, avoid a greater distancing between Mexico and its competitors and foster greater domestic equilibrium so Mexicans who live in the least favored regions do not continue to be excluded from modernization. Government and society must commit themselves and take serious action so that higher education is permanently a top priority for development. ❧



In developing countries, only 14.1 percent of the population between the ages of 18 and 23 is enrolled at institutions of higher learning.

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