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## Higher Education Policies in Mexico in the 1990s: A Critical Balance

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This article analyses recent policies in higher education in Mexico. The last two decades provide the starting point, and the interpretation centres around higher education policies drawn up by successive presidential administrations of Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) and Zedillo Ponce de León (1994–2000). The second part sets out an initial systemization of the political agenda launched by the federal government of Vicente Fox for the period 2001–2006.

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### Introduction

Over the last few years, the issue of knowledge in higher education institutions has become crucial for both political praxis and academia. The most diverse of opinions and approaches agree that cultivating and application of the scientific and humanistic knowledge, and extending higher education opportunities were essential in constructing the social order for the new century. Today, despite the importance placed on the university as part of the basic social agreements in place at the opening of the 21st century, policies and strategies for its development have had to face up to, and that not always successfully, the interests and conflicting demands of different actors and participants (Sporn, 1999; Barnett, 2000; Gumport, 2000; Neave, 2000; Altbach, 2001; Derridá, 2002).

Over the past half century, and more intensely over the past 10 years, higher education systems and institutions worldwide undertook reforms that significantly modify both their academic processes (Rodríguez-Gómez, 2002), their way of operation and government (Casanova-Cardiel, 2002). As in all processes of cultural change, transformation produced new tension, bringing into debate the very meaning of the university vis-à-vis the demands and expectations of the economic, social and political environment in each country and in the international sphere (UNESCO, 1998).



Aspects covered by the transformation processes were many, but the attention paid to such subjects as participation rates, equity, quality, evaluation and relevance of higher education stands out. In Mexico, as elsewhere, recent decades witnessed profound change in virtually all aspects of university life. Essentially, higher education has been caught up in a series of reforms that turned around the intent of successive national governments from the 1980s onwards to embark on a policy of modernization (Casanova-Cardiel, 1999).

Such intent was neither linear nor coherent. On the contrary, it brought together diverse, often disarticulated proposals. Despite the presence of political guidelines of a similar thrust throughout the last three government administrations, a more detailed analysis of the strategies effectively introduced and of the emphasis each government set by the policy of modernization reveals a pattern of trial and error rather than a continuity grounded in stable conceptual and political bases (Kent and De Vries, 1997; De Vries, 2000; Valenti and Mungaray, 2000; Mendoza, 2002; Richardson and Kent, 2002; Rodríguez-Gómez, 2002).

This article provides an overview of higher education policy during the last three government administrations. It identifies the salient features in the relationship between State and university from a dual perspective: on the one hand, from the trends and patterns of change experienced during the period in question and, on the other, in the light of the plans and programmes drawn up to bring about change in the higher education system. The article falls into two sections: the first considers the current features of higher education in Mexico in the light of the change tendencies that emerged in the 1990s; the second reviews the assumptions that underlay higher education policy of the administrations of Salinas, Zedillo and Fox. Finally, a number of considerations are put forward about the tensions that the authors believe currently confront the possibilities of change in the nation's higher education system.

## **Current Trends and Risks of Higher Education in Mexico**

This section is not an exhaustive description of the Mexican higher education system, but considers its more general features as a means of determining the thrust of change during the last decade. In the first place, higher education in Mexico provides training at higher technical university and professional associate, first degree, specialty, master's degree and Ph.D. levels. The total practice of the higher education institutions includes teaching functions, and some of the institutions also carry out research and knowledge dissemination activities. Higher education is dispensed in a variety of public and private bodies, with most enrolments concentrated in public institutions.



Higher education in Mexico covers more than 20% of the relevant age groups and there is parity between the sexes when total enrolment is broken down. At this level, there are more than 1,500 institutions with just over 200,000 teachers and more than two million students.<sup>1</sup> The period 2002–2003 saw a total of 2,236,791 students in higher education: 1,931,631 (86.4%) corresponding to university and technological first degrees; 166,873 (7.5%) to teacher training; and 138,287 (6.2%) to postgraduate studies.

In the 1990s, the higher education system underwent important transformations in practically all aspects — organizational, scale, geographical distribution and performance. Student numbers rose by some 45%. The teaching sector grew by nearly 49% and the number of institutions increased by almost 65%. The main tendencies can be grouped into seven areas:

1. *Growth in meeting potential demand.* In 1990, 13.5% of the population aged 18–23 attended the Higher Education System (HES). By the end of 2000, it covered 20% of this age group.
2. *Change in composition of enrolment in the public HES.* In public sector higher education, expansion derived almost exclusively from growth in the technological university. With the creation of almost 100 institutions (institutes and technological universities), the technological subsystem grew by over 60%, increasing from 20 to 36% of public HES supply. In contrast, the growth in the university was almost stationary: in this decade, registration grew by less than 7%. Finally, enrolment for public teachers' training courses increased from 9,000 to 11,000 students, maintaining its participation in the public HES at around 10%.
3. *Greater presence of the private sector in higher education provision.* During the 1990s, the provision in private sector in higher education reached remarkable dimensions. In 1990, private higher education institutions absorbed 17.4% of the demand for first degrees. In 2003, participation rose to 32%. To reach this level, the private system grew two and a half times, increasing at a rate of almost 10% a year during the period. The expansion of private higher education was extraordinary at postgraduate level. Enrolment rose by 4.5 times in barely 10 years. As expanding, the private system drove towards differentiation: on the one hand, the aggregate of higher education institutions governed by market conditions became firmly established. These institutions provide widely demanded professional training opportunities, but are bereft of research functions, cultural dissemination, nor do they possess an appropriate academic infrastructure. At present, barely one-fifth of the more than 700 existing private institutions of higher education can be considered universities; the rest are made up of institutes, centres, higher education colleges and other non-university establishments. On the other hand, the most solid private universities



developed territorial dissemination strategies, establishing regional campuses throughout the country.

4. *Strengthening the decentralization* of supply, and redressing the historic lag in the most backward states. Towards 1990, 23% of the student population at first degree level in universities and technological institutes were concentrated in the Federal District of Mexico City. By 2000, concentration had decreased to 21.5%. During the period, the states with greatest growth were Aguascalientes, Baja California Sur, Campeche, Chiapas, Hidalgo, Morelos, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Tlaxcala and Yucatán; in all these states, school enrolment grew two-fold or more. By contrast, university student numbers dropped in Jalisco and Puebla. In the rest of the states, positive growth rates were recorded, with variations.
5. *Greater concentration of school demand in areas and professional courses associated with the service sector.* Generally speaking, enrolment in the HES decreased in agricultural sciences, natural sciences and the exact sciences areas, a trend that has continued since the 1980s. Health sciences, education and humanities areas have remained constant as proportions of supply (9 and 5% respectively, without taking into account enrolment at teacher training colleges); in contrast, the social and administrative sciences continued their expansion to cover practically one-half of total first degree enrolment in the HES. At present, one-third of total enrolment is concentrated in just three options: law (12.2%), accounting (11.1%) and administration (10.2%). According to the ANUIES classification, approximately 70% of total higher education enrolment is associated with the tertiary sector of the economy, which is disproportionate with respect to the economically active population (53% of the work force belongs to the tertiary sector) or Gross Domestic Product (66% of GDP comes from the tertiary sector). This imbalance is considerably greater in states with higher levels of economic backwardness, for example, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Hidalgo and Nayarit where enrolment concentrated on professions related to the tertiary sector is considerably higher than the national average.
6. *Growth at postgraduate level.* Towards 1990, national postgraduate enrolment was little over 40,000 students. In 2003, the corresponding statistic was 138,287 students enrolled in specialties, master degrees and Ph.D.. This three-fold growth in enrolment was a result, on the one hand, of progressive increases in the schooling requirements of the modern sector of the labour market, and an explicit policy to strengthen the academic programmes of the higher education institutions. But, on the other hand, this expansion reflects a strangling of the labour market for professionals, a phenomenon that has made it attractive for young people to choose the option of continuing in the educational system (a large number of postgraduate students are protected by scholarships) instead of going out

to look for work. As mentioned above, the participation of the private sector at postgraduate level was very dynamic in the decade, twice as much or more than public sector growth in education at this level. It should be mentioned that in spite of this spectacular growth, scarcely 15% of first degree graduates go on to postgraduate training.

7. *Equilibrium in the proportion of men and women studying for first degrees.* Towards the end of the 1990s, the proportion of women in the HES became virtually the same as that of men. This phenomenon stems from both a greater presence of women in first degree tracks, teachers' training and technological courses and, simultaneously, stagnation in the male growth rate in university enrolment. At present, the proportion of women in the health sciences, social and administrative sciences and education and humanities areas (which together comprise almost 70% of total enrolment) is greater than the proportion of men.

Together with these changes, the 1990s saw the introduction and application of a new range of policy instruments including diversified financing, evaluation and accreditation, accountability, infrastructural consolidation, quality assurance and linkage. These lines of action were complemented by others, such as the growth in participation rates in higher education system and strengthening of the level of qualifications among teaching staff.

### **Higher Education Policies in Mexico between 1988 and 2003**

The political and economic framework in which the changes and reforms to higher education in Mexico are examined here corresponds principally to the terms in office of Presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) and Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (1994–2000). Both regimes were explicitly committed to a policy of modernization — although arguably such a policy began with the administration of president De la Madrid. Policy focused on developing a model in keeping with neo-liberal economic doctrine. During the Salinas presidency, further stimulus was given by the signature of multiple free trade agreements with the purpose of making the country part of the global economy. As a run-up to this strategy, the Foreign Investment Law (1993) was reformulated to give a legal grounding on which free trade agreements would be based. The same government administration signed the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which brought together Canada, the United States and Mexico. Mexico became part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1997) and entered APEC (Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation).

Under President Zedillo, this strategy continued through bilateral free trade treaties (with Uruguay, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Israel and Nicaragua) and



other multilateral agreements, the agreement with the European Union being one. Focusing the economy on exports and promoting direct foreign investment brought about the recovery of the modern sector in the Mexican economy and caused the principal macroeconomic indicators to rise. This strategy, however, generated serious problems of the social distribution of the wealth thus created, a fall in employment in the traditional productive sector and a crisis in the smallholder economy. A second feature in political economy of the 1990s was State withdrawal from the majority of those productive activities and services still under its control and a stimulus to private investment in different spheres, including education. The current administration of Vicente Fox Quesada (2000–2006) — heralded as a regime of transition and as apolitical alternative — has, as far as can be observed, pushed neo-liberalism even further, confirming thereby the model of modernization that first appeared on Mexico's political horizon during the Eighties.

### **The administration of Salinas de Gortari**

From his presidential campaign onwards, candidate Salinas emphasized the need to raise the quality of higher education as the prior condition for its transformation. This objective was ratified in the National Development Plan 1989–1994 and in the Educational Modernization Program 1989–1994, which

- a. announced the revival of indicative planning based on interaction between the Education Ministry (SEP) and the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES, 1999),
- b. stated that the Integral Program for the Development of Higher Education (PROIDES), approved by ANUIES in 1986, would be part of ongoing higher education strategies,
- c. established evaluation, rationalization of available resources and the reform of institutional procedures as main lines in the programme of renewal,
- d. indicated that the growth and distribution of supply would be guided by three principles: better use of existing capacity, incrementalism in the growth of institutions and opening up of new options,
- e. pointed out that growth would be accommodated through schemes of decentralization and regionalization derived from the National Development Plan. They also raised the issue of a policy to give low-income students access to higher education.

In concrete terms, the programme invoked extending educational supply in school and non-school modalities; according students' preferences to the supply of priority courses for development; regional imbalances in enrolment, the cutting back on excessive specialization; the establishment of national criteria and guidelines defining academic excellence; the implementation of



higher education evaluation procedures to determine yield, productivity, efficiency and quality levels. In effect, proposals included in the Educational Modernization Program followed up recommendations made by ANUIES in its document 'Declaraciones y aportaciones para la modernización de la educación superior' (Declarations and contributions for the modernization of higher education) of 1989. This was the Association's response to a request by Federal Government for a proposal that, commanding widespread consensus, could be incorporated into the government's programme.

Successive documents and policies shaped Salinas de Gortari's vision for higher education. In 1989, the National Commission for Higher Education Planning (CONPES) was reactivated, which once again put planning at the centre of educational policy. Not without significance was the impetus given to CONAEVA, a commission focused on evaluation. The complementary role played by ANUIES in the policies of government emerges in a 1990 document entitled '*Estrategia de la ANUIES para el mejoramiento del sistema de educación superior*' (ANUIES' strategy for improving the higher education system). The document touched upon seven programmes: academic excellence, improvement in research, postgraduate studies, continuing education, cultural extension, administration and support for senior high school studies. In 1991, National Commission for Higher Education Planning (CONPES), in its turn, published '*Prioridades y compromisos para la educación superior en México 1991–1994*' (Priorities and commitments for higher education in Mexico 1991–1994).

It laid out 10 lines for 'quality improvement':

- updating curricula and improvement in the quality of the training of professionals,
- teacher training,
- training of researchers,
- review and re-adaptation of educational supply,
- defining institutional identity in research and postgraduate studies,
- updating academic infrastructure,
- re-ordering of administration and normativity,
- an institutional information system,
- diversifying finance,
- promoting the participation of social and economic interests in the higher education area.

Viewed overall, the Salinas administration set great weight on developing those operational criteria that promote change in institutions of higher education. Although official rhetoric argued such measures were grounded in the principles of quality and efficiency, these aforementioned changes, however, had varied consequences, and not least, made the general issues facing higher





education even more problematic. In this sense, restricting the availability of university places in the areas of high demand, a policy both the Zedillo and Fox administrations would acknowledge later, deserves mention.

### **The administration of Zedillo Ponce de León**

The Educational Development Program (PDE), 1995–2000, was the basic document that shaped this administration's educational policy. Among other things, the PDE proposed establishing close links with the professional market and employment perspectives. It also raised the idea of the states' participating in both financing and coordinating educational supply according to the needs of the region and local communities. As with its predecessors, arguments in favour of academic quality, to be supported through improvement in study plans and programmes and by supplying adequate equipment — laboratories, libraries, computer centres and workshops, were well to the fore. As for the function of research, the PDE played up its role as a means to improve teaching and technological innovation. The practical application of research projects would be underlined in all cases.

The PDE was also committed to develop measures for raising the income of teachers and researchers in keeping with their professional output and achievement as well as to doubling the number of professors with postgraduate qualifications by the year 2000. In addition, the PDE upheld the continuity of the earlier administration, even deepening its evaluation policy. It proposed to improve coordination between institutions, organizations and subsystems and, finally, it signalled its intention to set up councils for relations with society or equivalent mechanisms so that community interests could make themselves heard in higher education.

Some of the PDE directives continued the planning work of ANUIES, in particular, the Council of Public Universities and Similar Institutions. In the document '*Avances de la universidad pública en México*' (Advances in the public university in Mexico) of 1994, the basis for achieving continuity in policies between administrations was set out. Similarly, the OECD examination of Mexico's educational policy was published in 1996 when Mexico joined that organization. The report, of both national and foreign experts, had its part in shaping the policies of higher education.

Nevertheless, despite continuity between the Salinas and Zedillo administrations of Salinas in such strategies as evaluation and financial differentiation, there were differences. For instance, the Zedillo regime was less interventionary in various aspects of institutional life. Indeed, it is possible to speak of relative decentralization in institutional decisions. Finally, it is not unimportant to remember that, during its first years, the Zedillo administration was faced with the economic crisis brought about by the devaluation of 1994. The federal

budget for higher education did not recover until 1999–2000. Fulfilment of the goals and objectives the plans put forward suffered from budgetary restrictions. As in the case of its predecessor administration, the Zedillo regime did not meet its main expectations. The disappointing results in terms of growth and participation, difficulties in linking the different levels of the system, the gap that continued between supply and demand on the labour market, and the failure to establish councils for relations with society, were all too visible.

### **The administration of Fox Quesada**

The much-vaunted government ‘of change’ maintained the drive towards modernization and extended strategies to make higher education a functioning element vis-à-vis demands from economics and politics. Thus, the National Higher Education Program 2001–2006 sees education as one of the factors essential to Mexico’s development. Using a peculiar financial metaphor, the current regime considers higher education to be ‘... a strategic means for the growth of the *human* and social *capital* of the nation’. According to the PNE, the principal problems in higher education are concentrated in three spheres:

1. access, equity and participation;
2. quality;
3. integration, coordination and management.

In the area of access, equity and participation, the PNE endorses a policy of growth in the higher education system based on criteria of quality and equity and similarly proposes greater equity among states and among social and ethnic groups. It proposes the extension and diversification of access to higher education, in particular for social groups ‘in a situation of disadvantage’, and among the indigenous population. One explicit initiative involves diversifying educational provision beginning with its better geographical and territorial distribution, the central idea being that the states may diversify supply in both the school and in open study modes. Other measures, namely the extension and strengthening the provision of postgraduate courses through better geographical distribution, are also envisaged.

The subject of quality raises, in first instance, the challenge of how to achieve greater flexibility in educational programmes, in developing an integrated dimension of knowledge, in providing continuing education for students, in fostering creativity and the *entrepreneurial mind set*, the use of foreign languages, logical thinking and in stimulating the transmission of values, among other aspects. Similarly, it seeks to raise student achievement and efficiency in their courses, improvement in retention rates and to open different option tracks at degree level. One item on the PNE’s agenda is to link courses



with the community, by means of a permanent review of the academic programme profiles and their ties with the labour market. This same perspective anticipates integrating the university's functions of teaching, research and dissemination. In training students, an attempt is being made to consolidate student support services and to effectively bring them to bear more closely on national problems. Cooperation among different institutions is an aspect the programme seeks to foster.

In the area of teacher performance, the PNE outlined the following targets: Teacher should have adequate academic and pedagogical training; academic staff organizations at different levels within the institutions of higher education should be strengthened. Postgraduate programmes are of special interest to the PNE, which evokes the need to improve quality.

Evaluation procedures remain an important part of national policy, which aims at consolidating national systems of evaluation and accreditation in both public and private institutions. The documents mention the need to review the academics' salary schemes and their effective use in order to improve teaching, research and dissemination quality. The document also refers to the need for the institutions to generate integral programmes in order to improve their educational processes.

Finally, integration, coordination and management of the higher education system pose a number of challenges. The first is to establish a planning frame to bring national and state systems as well as the individual establishment into closer relationship with society. The second is to open up the higher education system so that networks and cross-linkages develop and foster exchange between institutions and the environment. The third is to create real ties between different institutions that make up the higher education system and thereby achieve both the mobility of students and academics, and better ties between projects and infrastructure. The fourth refers to financing and its diversification. The fifth issue is to update the legal framework.

In summary, these are the central challenges outlined by the National Education Program 2001–2006. In reality, the PNE's proposals drew upon different programmes and policies among which the following are worth noting:

- a. The aim of extending participation has been tackled, primarily, through creating technological universities, polytechnic universities and public universities with joint federal and state financing. During the 3 years of the Fox administration, just over 50 of these institutions have been established. Between 2002 and 2003 alone, 26 new institutions were created. Of these, eight were technological universities, eight technological institutes, three polytechnic universities and nine public universities. The new public universities are: two campuses of the Universidad del Mar; two of the



Universidad del Istmo; two of the Universidad del Papaloapan; Universidad de la Sierra Sur; Universidad de Teotitlán; all of these are in Oaxaca State and one is in Sonora, Universidad de la Sierra. The pattern of 'bilingual intercultural universities' has been developed. These universities opened in 2003. The provision of public higher education has also been increased through a financing programme for public universities that increases enrolment through new first degree programmes or by modifying the existing ones. Thanks to this policy, public universities at state level have increased enrolments by some 60,000 new places for first year students.

- b. As well as extending supply, improving opportunities for equal access is addressed by the National Scholarship Program for Higher Education (PRONABES). This programme — with financial backing from the World Bank through a 50–50 joint funding scheme split between Federation and states — offers scholarships averaging 1,000 pesos a month to students from low-income families. It is aimed especially at students choosing courses of a technological nature or those in sparsely populated areas.
- c. Improving quality — the importance of which permeated all three presidential terms in office — is addressed through a policy of stimulating public universities to be innovative in their academic plans and programmes (in the teaching and research fields). Thus, through financing, the government acts upon those institutional aspects that spur innovation forward. The strategy builds out from the approach followed by the government authority and ANUIES over the last 2 years. From the 1990s onwards, the Ministry set up a scheme for distributing extra resources, based on allocating funds to institutions that develop programmes in such areas as training of academic staff, equipment and research or teaching programmes. This model, an addition to the normal subsidy, has been strengthened by the current administration in the shape of the Integral Institutional Strengthening Program (PIFI). The programme makes it attractive for institutions to draw up projects on 'the academic excellence of teaching staff, contents update, intensive use of technology and adoption of learning-centered educational approaches'. A further element of this strategy, which promotes quality by financing strategic projects and innovative procedures, comes in the form of evaluation and accreditation, managed by the Higher Education and Scientific Research Undersecretary's Office (SESIAC), in coordination with ANUIES. The goal of this arrangement is to stimulate academic programme accreditation as a way of demonstrating the level of quality attained. Starting in 1991 with the Inter-institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES), this scheme acquired further weight with the establishment, at the end of 2000, of the *Consejo para la Acreditación de la Educación Superior, AC* (COPAES). It authorizes non-governmental accreditation agencies and coordinates their work. According



to the Third Report of the Government of President Fox, in 2002 the number of accreditation organizations recognized by COPAES grew three-fold and the number of accredited programmes rose from 123 to 260.

- d. PNE's objective to improve system coordination, by drawing up the appropriate normative adaptations, has attracted little attention from the federal authorities. Though the intention of both the present and the previous administration has been to breathe new life into the agencies associated with the so-called National Higher Education Planning System, the National Coordinating Office for Higher Education Planning (CONPES), the state (COEPES) and regional (CORPES) agencies in particular, the fact remains that horizontal coordination has weakened. Indeed, the countervailing presence of the Under Secretary's Office for Higher Education and Scientific Research Undersecretary's Office and the Ministry of Education SEP-SESIC in defining academic reform, policies of quality, system planning and the rules and guidelines for finance have tended to shoulder it aside.

## Final Considerations

Though higher education reform is a matter of great importance for the nation, in political and social terms, the results of the last three decades are highly inconsistent. From the 1980s onwards, successive president administrations gave shape to a species of modernization not always coherent or endowed with clear direction. No guiding proposal has articulated different government policies into an overall vision, still less to attend — from a State perspective — to the demands and needs of Mexican society. The reforms undertaken emphasized the short term and a technical view of the complex dimensions with the higher education system. The social consequences of the university problem in Mexico have been ignored. Fundamental values of national higher education — democracy, equality and redress of social disparities — are barely touched upon in the rhetoric of modernization and technical functionality.

Social institutions are articulated around their time and in their space. Agreed, the transformations taking place in Mexico's higher education institutions respond to the specific dynamics of our country. Yet, there remain factors and tendencies that still have a broad impact upon it. This is the case of our present-day higher education. It is subject to a multitude of tensions extending far beyond the frontiers of the nation. Here, it is worth mentioning six among them. They are under debate in higher education. They are clearly present in Mexico:

- a. *Tradition and innovation.* One of the tensions, repeated in higher education times beyond count, turns around the historical traditions of university

institutions vis-à-vis the changes needed to meet current challenges. How can institutions change without harming their essence and their commitment to knowledge?

- b. *Growing demands and decreasing support.* Higher education has been placed at the centre of society. It is the repository to multitudinous individual, social, political, economic and cultural expectations and demands. Paradoxically, higher education is faced with financial restriction, and from the corridors of power the benefits of full, unconditional financing for the institutions entrusted with higher education have been limited. Can both extremes be reconciled? How may a suitable balance between demands for higher education and financial support be struck?
- c. *Reproduction or creation of knowledge.* The question of teaching and research in higher education arises again. Can they be brought together? Should they be separated? Where should cultural outreach be placed?
- d. *Higher education and power.* The presence of policy in higher education grows daily, and government decisions are felt in multiple aspects of the life of the educational institution. How may adequate margins of autonomy of knowledge be established vis-à-vis power? How may meeting higher education's social responsibilities be guaranteed without interfering with its functions?
- e. *Higher education and needs.* Higher education is subject to powerful tensions in its role with respect to markets. The pertinence of institutions 'producing' 'human resources' or 'human capital' for productive work is often discussed. So too is whether institutional responsibility should respond to the need to train social subjects in order to build up an increasingly complex society of work and knowledge. Can an agreement be found?
- f. *Functional higher education or higher education 'without conditions'.* A tension is acting upon the very sense of higher education. It is synthesized in the idea of higher education, functional, pragmatic in contrast with higher education a critical, one 'without conditions', the greatest commitment of which is centred on the search for truth and the right to question everything. Can higher education attend to the needs of the environment without compromising its academic essence? Is it in the realms of the possible to reconcile, within higher education, the demands of market forces and of the labour market with the broad and equally pressing of demands of a society that, like Mexico, is 'in transition'?



## Notes

1 Official statistics for school year 2002–2003 register the following indicators for the higher system as a whole: 2,236,791 students; 231,558 teachers; and 4,486 schools. The approximate figure of 1,500 ‘institutions’ corresponds to the statistical register of ANUIES (Anuario Estadístico, 2002).

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