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## Higher Education Reforms: Latin America in Comparative Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article introduces a special issue of EPAA/AAPE devoted to recent higher education reforms in Latin America. The last two decades have seen much policy development in higher education in the region, examined and discussed by scholars in each country, but dialog with the international literature on higher education reform, or an explicit comparative focus, have been mostly absent from these works. By way of presentation of the papers included in this issue, we first provide an overview of major policy changes in higher education in the Latin American region since the 1990s. We then turn to the six works in this special issue to describe the theories and methods supporting

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them. Next, we illustrate how general analytic categories can be derived from single or multi country case studies to illuminate themes capable of cutting across the particulars of national contexts, with their unique traditions, policy paths, and politics. Our three common threads are, first, the types of drivers for reform, that is, how policy change originates, either bottom-up from the institutions, or top-down from the government, and various possibilities in between. Second, understanding challenges to institutional autonomy in a continuum of intensity of state intended intervention in higher education. Third, explaining different levels of strain between public and private sectors in higher education based on conditions of competition for economic resources. While the papers in this special issue do not cover all countries, nor all issues on which policy has been crafted in the last two decades across the region, the collection of articles herein account for topics of enduring importance: faculty work in Ecuador, financial aid in Colombia, public policy decentralization in Argentina, quality assurance models in Colombia and Uruguay, the emerge of new institutions and universities in Argentina and Uruguay, and social justice, access, and inclusion in higher education, in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador. The articles presented in this special issue provide much insight onto higher education policy in Latin America and, additionally, offer ample opportunity to develop social science knowledge on the basis of strong comparative work.

**Keywords:** Higher education reform; Policy analysis; Transformation of higher education; Comparative education; Change in universities

### **Reformas de la educación superior: América Latina en perspectiva comparada**

**Resumen:** Este artículo presenta un número especial de EPAA/AAPE dedicado a reformas recientes de la educación superior en América Latina. Las últimas dos décadas han visto mucho desarrollo de políticas en educación superior en la región, que han sido examinadas y discutidas por académicos en cada país, pero el diálogo con la literatura internacional sobre reformas en educación superior, o una intención explícitamente comparada, han estado más bien ausentes de estos trabajos. A modo de introducción de los trabajos incluidos en este número especial, en primer lugar ofrecemos un panorama de los principales de los principales cambios en educación superior en la región latinoamericana desde los años 90 del siglo pasado. A continuación, tornamos nuestra atención a los seis artículos en este número especial, para describir las teorías y métodos en que se basan. Luego, ilustramos cómo es posible extraer categorías analíticas de alcance general a partir de estudios de caso de uno o más países, para iluminar temas transversales que trascienden las particularidades de los contextos nacionales y sus únicas tradiciones, trayectorias de política pública, y configuraciones políticas. Nuestras tres líneas comunes son, en primer lugar, los tipos de impulsos para la reforma, es decir, cómo se origina el cambio de la política, si es de abajo hacia arriba, desde las instituciones, o de arriba hacia abajo, desde el gobierno, con las variadas posibilidades que existen en medio. Segundo, entender los desafíos a la autonomía institucional en un continuo de intensidad de la intervención que el Estado propone implantar en la educación superior. Tercero, explicar los variados grados de tensión entre el sector público y el privado de la educación superior en función de las condiciones de competencia por recursos económicos. Si bien los artículos en este número especial no cubren a todos los países, ni todos los problemas para los cuales se han diseñado e implementado políticas en las últimas dos décadas a lo largo de la región, la colección de trabajos aquí reunida da cuenta de asuntos de continua importancia: trabajo de los académicos en Ecuador, ayudas financieras en Colombia,

descentralización de las políticas públicas en Argentina, modelos de aseguramiento de la calidad en Colombia y Uruguay, la aparición de nuevas instituciones y universidades en Argentina y Uruguay, y la justicia social, el acceso y la inclusión en educación superior en Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Chile, Colombia, y Ecuador. Los artículos reunidos en este número especial ofrecen considerable profundidad en el análisis de la política de educación superior en América Latina y, adicionalmente, presentan amplias oportunidades para desarrollar conocimiento en las ciencias sociales sobre la base de un sólido trabajo comparativo.

**Palabras-clave:** Reforma de la educación superior; Análisis de políticas; Transformación de la educación superior; Educación comparada; Cambio en las universidades

### **Reforma do ensino superior: América Latina em perspectiva comparada**

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta uma edição especial da EPAA / AAPE dedicada a reformas recentes no ensino superior na América Latina. As duas últimas décadas têm visto muito desenvolvimento de políticas de ensino superior da região, que foram examinados e discutidos por acadêmicos em cada país, mas o diálogo com a literatura internacional sobre as reformas no ensino superior, ou uma intenção explícita comparação, foram em vez ausentes dessas obras. Como uma introdução para as obras incluídas nesta edição especial, primeiro nós fornecemos uma visão geral das principais mudanças no ensino superior na América Latina desde os anos 90 do século passado. Em seguida, voltamos nossa atenção para os seis artigos desta edição especial, para descrever as teorias e métodos se baseiam. Então, nós ilustrar como é possível extrair categorias analíticas de aplicação geral a partir de estudos de caso de um ou mais países, para iluminar temas transversais que transcendem as particularidades dos contextos nacionais e das suas tradições únicas, trajetórias de política pública e configurações políticas. Nossos três linhas comuns são, em primeiro lugar, os tipos de impulsos para a reforma, isto é, como a mudança de política origina-se, se baixo para cima, das instituições, ou para cima e para baixo, do governo, com as várias possibilidades que existem no meio. Em segundo lugar, compreender os desafios da autonomia institucional em um continuum de intensidade da intervenção que o Estado se propõe a implementar no ensino superior. Em terceiro lugar, explicar os diferentes graus de tensão entre os setores público e privado de ensino superior, dependendo das condições de competição por recursos econômicos. Enquanto os artigos desta edição especial não cobrem todos os países, nem todos os problemas para os quais são concebidas e aplicadas políticas nas últimas duas décadas em toda a região, a coleção de obras aqui reunidas percebe assuntos importância contínua: o trabalho de acadêmicos no Equador, a ajuda financeira na Colômbia, a descentralização das políticas públicas na Argentina, modelos de garantia de qualidade na Colômbia e no Uruguai, o surgimento de novas instituições e universidades na Argentina e no Uruguai, e justiça social, o acesso e inclusão no ensino superior na Argentina, Bolívia, Brasil, Chile, Colômbia e Equador. Os artigos reunidos nesta edição especial fornecem profundidade considerável na análise da política de ensino superior na América Latina e, adicionalmente, têm amplas oportunidades para desenvolver o conhecimento nas ciências sociais, com base em sólido trabalho comparativo.

**Palavras-chave:** Reforma do ensino superior; Análise de políticas; Transformação do ensino superior; Educação comparada; Mudança em universidades

## Higher Education Reforms: Latin America in Comparative Perspective

Over the last two decades, Latin American countries have undergone several attempts to introduce change in their national higher education systems. Intense public debates are currently present in several countries that have just implemented or proposed structural reforms, such as Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador. Thus, the Latin American territory has become a fertile case to conceptualize and learn about contemporary national reforms in higher education, in the context of transformations taking place in higher education systems elsewhere (Altbach, 2016; Collins & Neubauer, 2015; Musselin & Teixeira, 2014). Even though national reforms in Latin American countries have been examined and discussed locally, comparative work across nations is scarce.

The purpose of this special issue is to analyze, from a comparative perspective, and in dialogue with the relevant international literature, the higher education reforms initiated by Latin American governments since the 1990s. For the purposes of this project, we defined “reform” as a coherent set of public policies deployed by a national government with the goals of transforming totally or partially the structure or organization of a higher education system, its governance, its funding, its functions, or its results. As an object of study, reforms may include measures in every stage of development, from early design and discussion, to implementation, regardless of whether results matched expectations or not.

The context is well known: globalization, the knowledge society, expansion of enrollments, rising costs and governments reluctance to absorb them, and new forms of accountability derived from the new public management approach are trends found throughout the world. Latin America has experienced all of these influences with a certain delay, owing to the “lost decade” of the 1980s (Talavera Deniz et al., 1991), a period of acute economic recession, rough transitions to democratic rule, and economic structural adjustment programs promoted by the multilateral financial institutions.

Transformation initiatives for higher education began mostly in the 1990s. These reforms present themselves in close connection to the expansion, diversification and privatization of systems (García Guadilla, 2003). From a critical standpoint, these policies are attributed to the preeminence of a neoliberal agenda in public policy (Gentili, 2001), inaugurated in Chile at the outset of the 1980s, and adopted later, as the contention goes, in Argentina, Mexico, Peru and other countries in the region in the 1990s.

While all generalizations admit exceptions and, certainly, trends of change are not homogeneous throughout the region, among the reforms of the 1990s one can usually find the introduction of evaluations and accreditation systems, the creation of new public institutions of higher education, and the expansion of private provision buttressed upon new student funding mechanisms. Also present during this decade were programs to support research and graduate programs and the introduction of new strategies for allocating public funding, either on a competitive basis or in the form of multiyear contracts with agreed upon expected result, all of which was made fiscally viable as a result of better budgetary conditions arising from the expansion of the economies of the region in those years (Balán, 2006; Kent, 2002).

Turning now to the following decade, the rate of policy development for higher education appeared to slow throughout the region, and the beginning of the new century was characterized by the maintenance and consolidation of initiatives previously introduced. Yet, within that context, a new emphasis on policies for access and equity is apparent, together with programs to strengthen the technical and vocational sectors (CINDA 2007, 2011).

A most recent period, from 2009 to 2013, has been extensively documented by Brunner & Villalobos (2014), who report on both policy measures that deepen trajectories already in place, and

others that initiate new courses of public action. They highlight the new legislation in Ecuador, which brought tuition free education in public institutions and strengthened the mechanisms for quality evaluation and control. Uruguay, Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela saw the creation of new public institutions of higher education, often of a very different nature than predecessor universities. Student financial aid expanded in Chile and Brazil, while Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and several nations in Central America reinforced systems for evaluation, accreditation and public information. New programs in support of research and training of academic staff were put in place in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, while Colombia and the Dominican Republic made efforts to boost technical and vocational education. As shall be explored in several articles in this special issue, various programs for inclusion and affirmative action were rolled out in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. Furthermore, we have been reminded through powerful student movements in Chile, Mexico and Colombia in 2011 of the longstanding (albeit sometimes dormant) potential of higher education in Latin America to generate major social conflict and political change.

As interpreted by researchers reporting on them, these policies have sought to improve equity, promote changes in the structure and functions of the systems, and adapt their governance arrangements to changes in the social, economic and political environments (Brunner & Villalobos, 2014, p. 91).

With this background, our call for submissions to this special issue suggested the following questions as possible foci of the contributions we were looking for:

- How do reform agendas originate?
- What roles do influential actors play in their definition, such as international organizations, university associations, student movements and unions, faculty guilds, alumni, or the business sector?
- What can we learn from the implementation of these policies that may be of interest to the more general problem of policy implementation?
- What are the ideologies at play, both for and against reforms?
- How does the Latin American experience compare to reform processes in higher education elsewhere?
- How do institutions of higher education adapt to changes in the policy environment?
- What ideals of models of the university are at stake in these processes of change?

In answer to our call, we received more than 30 proposals and selected 13 of them for a peer-review process. Finally, we accepted six articles for publication. Each of these articles has a distinguishable theoretical framework and uses an empirical approach to their investigations. We sought this scholarly emphasis in order to increase our understanding of the reform dynamics across countries and to enrich future research as well as practice. By getting beyond the local context and its political tensions, we will be able to look at our national systems in relationship to the region and to the forces that today shape global, national, and local systems of higher education.

In coherence with the purpose of this special issue, we did not privilege a topic or a country over the others. The authors chose a particular research topic, selected a theoretical framework, and performed a particular method. As a result, we cover here issues related to faculty work (Ecuador), financial aid (Colombia), public policy decentralization (Argentina), quality assurance models (Colombia and Uruguay), the emerge of new institutions and universities (Argentina and Uruguay), and social justice, access, and inclusion in higher education (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile,

Colombia, and Ecuador). We acknowledge that this collection of papers does not address all the key issues that set the agendas in today higher education, such as student protests, demands for more research funding, or the need for new approaches to teaching and learning. However, collectively they provide a strong foundation for a more complete and comparative research program of the region.

In terms of theory, the authors bring primarily organizational theories to their works, such as resource dependence and neoinstitutional perspectives (González & Claverie, Johnson, Landoni-Couture, Pineda & Celis). Other conceptual frameworks included notions related to belonging (Vargas & Heringer), governance (Villalobos, Treviño, Wyman & Scheele), and models of intergovernmental relations (González & Claverie). We see from these pieces that there is a dialog with the international literature that we expect will continue to evolve as scholars of Latin America contribute to the field of higher education internationally. Regarding methods, it is not surprising that most articles use case studies, based on interviews or document analysis. This emphasis might indicate a need for understanding the social and political mechanisms behind the national reforms. We hope that as we move forward with more robust comparative strategies, we will be able to explore other qualitative and quantitative approaches beyond the purely descriptive.

## Major Themes

Across the articles, we identified three themes, issues, or tensions that are present in more than a single case. First, authors ask where the reforms come from, or what motivates them. Second, there is a concern about how the policy changes might affect university autonomy. Third, the boundaries and relationship between the public and private sectors of higher education are presented as a source of growing tension in the region. These three themes provide us with a grid to analyze the contributions grouped in this special issue, and project a few analytical categories for future work. In the remainder of this introduction, we will discuss each of these themes in turn.

### The Origins of Reforms

Interestingly, the authors take different perspectives to answer this question. Most of the articles present the reforms as result of top-down or bottom-up initiatives. The case of Ecuador, under the presidency of Rafael Correa (2007-2017), is presented as an example of the former. Johnston reminds us that although the new 2008 Ecuadoran Constitution declared public higher education tuition-free for its citizens, Correa has spent “much of his tenure as president attempting to improve the quality of higher education in Ecuador.” President Correa’s personal efforts have mobilized structural changes to the entire sector.

This is not what has been observed in other countries. Landoni-Couture, for instance, coins the concept “reform dynamism” to discuss a series of key policy changes in Uruguay, between 2008 and 2014. There was no one leader or even a political party that pushed for the changes, but rather an intense political debate in which many actors took stage. González and Claverie report a similar debate between “autonomistas” y “regulacionistas” (autonomy and regulatory advocates, respectively) to explain the emergence of regionalist policies of higher education.

Vargas and Heringer also point out to hybrid construction of student persistence policies in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. In all these countries, the governments actively promoted access and persistence in universities, giving them policy and funding support. However, universities had a larger room to adapt each policy to their context, or had initiated institutional programs for equitable access on their own.

According to Villalobos et al., this mechanism is also reflected in Bolivia, with the creation and funding of the policy of intercultural universities. Although in this case the State played a central role, institutions and their local communities kept the decision-making power over admissions. From a more bottom-up perspective, Pineda and Celis describe how the Colombian *Ser Pilo Paga*, a student loan program, was born in the Engineering Department at Universidad de Los Andes to be then adapted and expanded to the entire country. According to these authors, the program resonated with the government's rhetoric on student choice and institutional competition, which amplified its effect to a nation level.

A mechanism of institutional isomorphism is another conceptual perspective offered by the authors to study the origins of reforms. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) proposed three types of isomorphic changes to explain why institutions tend to resemble each other rather than differentiate overtime. These mechanisms are the *coercive*, responses to political influences; *mimetic*, imitation to the most prestigious institution to cope with uncertainty; and *normative*, compliance with professional standards and practices. In this special issue, these and other institutional concepts are used to describe reforms and policies in Latin American higher education.

Landoni-Couture, for instance, suggests that private institutions in Uruguay tend to resemble the programs of the public Universidad de la República (UDELAR) as a consequence of coercive and mimetic mechanisms. On one hand, the government imposes strict regulations that challenge autonomy and impose UDELAR as a template for new program offerings. On the other hand, private institutions seek to emulate UDELAR to cope with the uncertainties in the regulatory environment. In Landoni-Couture's perspective, the Uruguayan government designed a regulatory framework for private institutions as a way to keep control over the sector, strengthening the influence of the UDELAR model.

González and Claverie use a similar framework to explain the creation of the *Consejo de Planificación Regional de la Educación Superior* (CPRES, which stands for Council of Regional Planning of Higher Education, in Spanish) in 1995. In this case, the governmental intention of planning or steering from a distance had a different outcome than that of the Uruguayan reforms. González and Claverie present CPRES as a form of interstitial organizations (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) that aim to coordinate different universities in a particular region. Instead of regulating or standardizing regional actions, universities took over the conduction of CPRES, creating wide differences among regional territories.

Finally, while isomorphic mechanisms would lead to expect some form of policy "contagion" (McLendon, Heller, & Young, 2005) or convergence across countries in the region (and some authors can point to examples, such as Pineda and Celis suggesting that the model for funding researchers in Colombian universities follow Chilean and Argentinian practices) there is overall scarce evidence of policy convergence across countries in the cases covered herein. A possible hypothesis that would explain the lack of contagion across states is the weak base of higher education professionals in government agencies. McLendon et al. (2005) suggest that these professionals would "possess greater informational, technical, and decisional capacities" (p. 371), which in turn would allow the adoption of higher education policy innovations. For instance, Landoni-Couture points out that new policy design in Uruguay did not count with the permanent participation of local higher education specialists, which affected the continuity and consistency of policy changes in the sector.

A third perspective relates to the framing or reframing that policy makers use to promote the reforms. Again, Ecuador offers a strong illustration. Johnston highlights President Correa's statement to *The New York Times* that the country "has the worst universities in Latin America." This statement represents a breakthrough with the past, establishing the foundations for a new

order. Pineda and Celis point out that the programs *Ser Pilo Paga* and *Mide* were promoted as a “best practices” and associated by the government with prestige words such as TICs, quality, and research. In their opinion, this follows a global or neoliberal rhetoric. Regarding issues access and equity, Villalobos et al. find that Latin American countries are advancing beyond the discussion over merit or needs-based programs. Countries have moved, according to these authors, to a more complex framing of their programs, considering the patterns and trajectories that students follow to access higher education. Future studies on policy framing may benefit from the rich spectrum of strategies followed by policy makers in Latin American higher education.

### Public Policy in Environments of High Autonomy

As Vargas and Heringer remind us in their article, Latin America embraced a tradition of extensive university autonomy from the government, in the wake of the Córdoba 1918 movement. It is no surprise, then, that autonomy would be invoked in discussions about government action in higher education. The cases of Argentina and Uruguay are rich in nuance about how this tension plays out. González and Claverie explain how the CPRES came about as a result of negotiations, at the time of the discussion of the Higher Education Law passed in 1995, between those in favor of regulation and those who took the banner of autonomy. González and Claverie succinctly describe the difference between the two camps: autonomists do not reject regulation, but would like to see it circumscribed to “setting the rules of the game,” while “regulators” support a steering and promotion role on the part of the government. As is usually the case with institutions resulting from negotiations between parties with different fundamental views, the Argentine regional councils meant one thing to one of the camps, and another thing to the other faction.

Certainly, the appeals for autonomy grow in intensity in step with the ambition of a reform agenda. A sort of continuum of intensity of changes can be discerned across the six papers: In the institutional arrangements to foster retention reported on the work by Vargas and Heringer, the hand of the government is the softest, mostly relying on financial assistance to students. While scholarships and other forms of financial aid are also dominant to increase equitable access, the article by Villalobos and his colleagues suggests the possibility of other, more forceful means, such as the institution of quotas for Afro descendants in Brazil, or the creation of indigenous universities in Bolivia, which may collide with strict autonomic viewpoints. The evolution of the quotas policies in Brazil shows that the autonomy defense put forth by universities can be negotiated through a relaxation of the definitions of the target populations of the quotas, albeit perhaps losing some of the original, race-centered intent of this policy.

Ecuador provides the more profound case of reform amongst the countries studied here. In Johnson’s words: “Under government auspices, new constitutional mandates, a new higher education law, and a new government-run post-secondary accrediting body have shifted the post-secondary sector from deregulation and the decentralization of a higher education system that lacked accountability to a centralized and decidedly regulated system. This shift has been met with debate and accusations from university administrators that the government was attempting to undermine university autonomy in violation of the constitution.” The comfortable congressional majority and favorable poll ratings enjoyed by President Correa during most of his administration did much to overcome opposition by universities. A weaker, or less determined government would have probably had to contemporize with the political forces that higher education institutions are able to mobilize in their interest, especially when the perceived threat affects them all.

The derailment in Uruguay of the proposal for the creation of a quality assurance agency seems a case of this lack of conviction or policy steering capacity on the part of the government, meeting a higher education system united by little enthusiasm with the proposal, albeit for different

reasons. UDELAR was comfortable with Uruguay's marked public-private cleavage as the main regulator of policy, something the new agency may have softened. Private institutions, in turn, feared expanded influence of UDELAR, now through the accrediting agency. The case of Uruguay brings us to our last general theme, that of the public versus private rationales in policy discussion.

### **The Private-Public Divide: A Question of Resource Distribution**

Latin America has been a pioneer region in the growth of private higher education (Levy, 1986). Many of its countries exhibit majority enrollments in private institutions, by a large margin of difference in the cases of Brazil and Chile.

The public-private divide has been a criterion for policy decisions as often as not (Levy, 2006), as the papers in this collection attest. In issues related to student access and persistence, whether the student attends a public or a private institution seems to carry little relevance. Especially where massification has taken place in the private sector, and students in need of support tend to be found mostly in private, non-selective institutions.

The case of Argentina is of interest with respect to this topic as well, for the two sectors seem to have reached a peaceful *modus vivendi*, no doubt helped by the fact that with private enrollments hovering around 20%, neither sector see the other as a threat. Coordination under common structures of the system can then proceed without much friction, as long as privates do not claim a stake over public funding.

However, when resources are at stake, the public-private divide becomes more salient. The struggle in Ecuador to find and retain suitable faculty members pit the two sectors against one another: public universities, which are tuition free, find their state provided budgets insufficient to lure good academics with competitive salaries. Private institutions, on the other hand, being able to collect tuition, and free from the strictures of public sector salary rules and scales, can use those advantages to win over the best faculty members. A partial compensation of this imbalance is afforded by the state funded Prometeo program, only open to public universities, to support financially the hiring of scholars from abroad.

The case of student financial aid in Colombia, presented in the contribution by Pineda and Celis, epitomizes the political fall out of making public funds available to private institutions. Given that it is very unusual that private institutions would receive funding from the government in the form of block grants or annual subsidies, the main vehicle for public economic support to the private sector is "sector neutral" student financial aid, that is, assistance to those deserving support on the basis of their need, regardless of the public or private nature of their institution. Where state colleges are tuition free or nearly so, it is to be expected that tuition assistance (in this case, in the form of a loan) will go overwhelmingly (95% of the money in the case of Colombia) to students in private institutions. Why these students, who are selected in Colombia among the top performers in their school cohort, would choose a private institution over a public one, once they are funded, is an important empirical question. Supporters of private higher education would argue that a good private university is better than a good public one, or that they operate free of the disruptions caused by student activism, or that they are better at securing employment for its graduates. Critics will argue that the perceived advantages of the best private institutions boil down to social capital among its students, clever marketing, and shirking of their duties to the public good.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The three common threads we identified in the articles in this special issue, together with others readers of EPAA may find, suggest that in spite of the heterogeneous and partly idiosyncratic

landscape of Latin American national higher education systems, the diversity of the politics across countries and over time, and varying approaches to policy development throughout, generalizable statements about policy changes are available for scholarly identification and analysis.

Such is the promise of case-based comparative analysis: rich, holistic description of multiple cases can lead to the valid inference of general patterns (Ragin, 1987) or, at a minimum, to analytical categories useful beyond a single case. Our identification here of types of drivers for reform, or understanding challenges to institutional autonomy in a continuum of intensity of state intended intervention in higher education, or seeking to explain different levels of public-private strain based on competition for economic resources are examples of potential vectors for generalization. The articles presented in this special issue provide much insight onto higher education policy in Latin America and, additionally, offer ample opportunity to develop social science knowledge on the basis of strong comparative work.

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