

**Documentos  
para el debate**

Preliminary report

# **The privatization of universities in Latin America**

Executive Summary

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## **Introduction**

Privatization processes have occupied countless academic, political and journalistic pages since the 1990s, when they became one of the leading proposals in the context of the Washington Consensus. Privatization initiatives of public service companies –water supply, electricity, communications, postal services, transportation, etc.–, of pension and health systems, of procedures or dependencies within the public sphere, among other areas; multiplied in most Latinamerican and Caribbean countries; and had consequences that, even today, continue to determine substantive aspects of our societies.

Education was no exception. Since those years, broader and more complex forms of privatization have been developed, even reaching the point of identifying education as a commercial service in free trade agreements, in general, and particularly in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO). These processes have allowed the market and the economic sector, in these years of the 21st century, to acquire more and more interference and capillarity in our educational systems and in the development of policies aimed at regulating them.

In this study, we intend to develop and analyze some trends and aspects of the processes of privatization of education, concentrating on higher education and, more specifically, on university systems.

Latin America and the Caribbean constitute, together with South Asia, the two most privatized regions of the planet when talking about higher education: there are more

students in the private sector than in the public one, approximately two out of every three universities are private, and for more than a decade, the number of graduates in private institutions exceeds by far that of public institutions.

Therefore, it becomes evident that the issue is of enormous relevance for the region both now and in the future, if we consider that most of its professionals, intellectuals and experts will have been trained in private institutions, in which the training that is offered responds to the interests and perspectives of either their owners or a specific social sector.

The size of the private university sector is an important part of the problem, but it is not the only one. The other part is linked to the privatization and commodification of the public sector, either through the introduction of market logistics and practices, or through the development of public policies that appeal, to a greater or lesser extent, to the interests of the private sector. .

In recent times, since the beginning of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has put a strain on educational systems in general and particularly so in higher education systems; and has further developed or accelerated some of the privatization processes, at the same time that social and educational inequalities have grown wider.

This report is the result of a research project promoted by the Institute of Studies and Training of CONADU (IEC – CONADU), together with Education International, starting in 2018. The main objective of this project is to analyze the processes of privatization and commodification of universities in Latin America and the Caribbean, investigating and reconstructing trends at the regional level as well as local processes. For the latter, in-depth studies were carried out that, to this date, have addressed four cases: Argentina, Chile, Peru and the Dominican Republic. This text is mainly composed of one of the chapters of what will be the final report, which will be published in a few more months.<sup>1</sup> It is important to clarify that, given the limited space of this document, the specific cases have not been included in more than a few references; but the final report will include them with in-depth research on each of them.

Our starting point is that higher education is a public and social good, a universal human right and the duty of the State, as established in the Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education (CRES) in Cartagena, in 2008<sup>2</sup>, and ratified at 2018's CRES in Córdoba<sup>3</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> The final report of this investigation will be published around the middle of the current year. However, in 2019 a preliminary report on the project of this investigation was published, which can be accessed through the following link: [https://iec.conadu.org.ar/files/publicaciones/1574783072\\_2019-tendencias-de-privatizacion-y-mercantilizacion.pdf](https://iec.conadu.org.ar/files/publicaciones/1574783072_2019-tendencias-de-privatizacion-y-mercantilizacion.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (CRES), Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Declaration of the Third Regional Conference on Higher Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (CRES), Córdoba, Argentina, 2018.

The Third Regional Conference on Higher Education for Latin America and the Caribbean endorses the agreements reached [...] while reasserting the principle that considers that Higher Education is a common public good, a universal human right which should be ensured by all States. These principles are based on the deep conviction that the access to, and use and democratization of knowledge is a collective, strategic social asset essential to guarantee the basic human rights and the wellbeing of our peoples, the construction of full citizenship, the social emancipation, and the regional integration with solidarity of Latin America and the Caribbean (p. 32).

It is from this perspective that we analyze the trends and processes of privatization and commodification of higher education, aiming to contribute to the public debate and the development of strategies and policies that propose, on one hand, the democratization of universities and the guaranteeing of this right; and on the other, that the purpose of higher education is the construction of fair societies and sovereign peoples.

The authors hope that this report, and the investigation as a whole, will constitute contributions to the necessary public debate on this issue; a debate that becomes essential in a world in which the concentration of wealth and inequalities have only grown in recent decades, and in which higher education has been, in a large number of countries, part of those processes of amplification of injustices.

## **The privatization and commodification of universities in Latin America: tendencies and tensions**

In recent decades, in terms of expansion of its higher education systems, Latin America has witnessed a phenomenon that places it in a unique situation when compared to all other regions. While since the turn of the century enrollment rates have tended to increase worldwide, which is reflected globally in an increase from 19% to 38% from 2000 to 2018, Latin America and the Caribbean, together with East and Southeast Asia, are the regions that have registered the most notorious expansions (Unesco-IESALC, 2020). Between 2010 and 2017 there was an average annual growth in enrollment of 4%, which allowed it to exceed 28 million students; being Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia and Bolivia countries that presented greater dynamism in student population growth (Red ÍndicES, 2019). This expansion meant an increase in the gross enrollment rate at this level, which doubled in the last 20 years, reaching almost 52% in 2018 (Unesco-IEU); as well as greater participation from the region in the worldwide enrollment rate, which went from 11.98% in 2014 to 12.41% in 2019 (Rama, 2021). This process is related to growing trends in secondary education enrollment and graduation rates in recent years in the region.

These auspicious data, however, hide two issues: on one hand, the high degrees of inequality that persist both between countries and within them; on the other, the fact that this expansion was carried out in general through the privatization of higher

education systems, which threatens the consolidation of those same processes of expanding access and effective exercise of higher education as a right.

Regarding the first point, even though there is an expansion of the systems and a great increase in enrollment, there are very different situations within the region: while Argentina, Chile, Peru and Uruguay are in the stage of universalization of higher education with gross rates above 50%, the rest of the countries are in the massification stage with rates between 15% and 50%, with Honduras being the country with the lowest coverage with 16% (Red ÍndicES, 2019). A piece of datum that is closely linked to the degree of inequality regarding schooling rates at the secondary level: while in 2018 countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, Brazil and Peru exceeded 85%; Mexico, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic are between 75% and 80%; and other countries such as Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, register even lower rates, although there is no recently updated data (Siteal, 2018). Also, in addition to inequality between countries, not all segments of a country's population benefit equally from access to higher education, since in the vast majority there are still large differences in participation rates according to income levels, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, etc. For example, young people in urban areas are 22% more likely to enroll in higher education than those in rural areas, a number that goes up to 35% in countries such as Colombia or Bolivia (Unesco-IESALC, 2020).

The second issue to point out is that a large part of the expansion of access to higher education in the region was done through the private sector, which increased its participation in enrollment rates both in absolute and relative terms, and came to represent more than 50% since 2003. This positions Latin America as the region in which the privatization and commodification of higher education grew the most urgently and constantly in recent decades, making it "hyper-privatized" (Saforcada & Rodríguez Golisano, 2019). While central countries, under the impulse of neoliberal principles that prevailed towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, redesigned their public policy instruments following the New Public Management, incorporating *market-type mechanisms* to rationalize the allocation of fiscal resources and make it more efficient; in peripheral regions such as Latin America governments opted to *privatize massification*, leaving absorption of the demand from new student groups in the hands of private providers (Bruner, 2007).

This second issue is the one that will be analyzed in this report. First, a historical analysis up to this state of *hyper-privatization*, which gives a glimpse into a new instance of privatization and commodification in progress with its own characteristics. In this development, special attention is given to the political cycles that have occurred in the region in the last 40 years, focusing on the orientation of university policy and the tensions in it caused by privatization processes. Secondly, an analysis of data on

current trends is presented, taking up the classic indicators, supply, demand and spending; that show the degree of privatization in higher education systems; giving a clear-cut image of the phenomenon's dimension in the region, mainly in recent years. Finally, a newer analysis is introduced for the level, which indicates new trends within the deepening of the studied processes: research and financing. Likewise, certain elements are included that exhibit a growing blurring of the limits between public and private, as a key component of these trends. This point aims to contribute to revealing behaviors assumed by processes of privatization and educational commodification, which require a multidimensional view. Hence, in addition to the analysis of classic indicators of privatization, other new ones were taken into consideration that allow addressing the transversality and multipolarity of the phenomena of privatization, commodification and commercialization of higher education today.

## **Towards a matrix of hyper-privatization: the expansion of higher education in Latin America**

Different recognized specialists in higher education in the region (Balan and Faneli, 1993; Krotsch, 2001; García Guadilla, 2001; Acosta, 2005; Rama 2017) recall the analysis made by Daniel Levy (1986) at the beginning of the 80s on the different key moments of expansion of the private sector and its characterization as "waves" that generated a process of expansion in higher education systems. The *first wave* of creation of private universities generated sectorization at the university level, which organized itself through a public or private dichotomy; while the *second wave* began a process of diversification within the private sector that would assume more distinguished aspects in the following waves.

In this section will be highlighted the main characteristics of these movements that reflect the general trend in the region and that, according to the same author and without being completely independent or uniform internally, allow, with some partial or full exceptions (Cuba, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay), to account for the processes that have taken place in a large number of Latin American countries (Levy, 1991). Also, the State's role will be incorporated as a key factor, especially since the *third wave*, where there is more active intervention by the government in higher education systems.

### **The expansion of the private university sector in the mid-20th century: first and second waves**

Generally speaking, it can be said that the public-statal sector had a monopoly on university education in the region until the mid-20th century, when denominational



universities sponsored by the Catholic Church began to proliferate, forming the *first wave* of expansion of private higher education in Latin America. This process salvaged the experiences of post-secondary Catholic education customary through the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century under various forms of institutionalization, which in Chile (1888) and Peru (1917) were even formalized as universities, being pioneers of this process. But since the 1940s, Catholic university institutions systematically expanded in the region, thus producing an institutional proliferation in various Latin American cities, which continued well into the 1960s: Brazil (1941), Ecuador (1946), Venezuela (1953), Colombia (1953), Mexico (1954), Argentina (1959), Paraguay (1960), Guatemala (1962), the Dominican Republic (1962), Bolivia (1966); and starting in 1953, consolidated the Organization of Catholic Universities of Latin America (ODUCAL). This process was the product of a reaction to the secularity of public institutions, but also an attempt to assert and institutionalize the Church's and various conservative groups' power in their quest to maintain social conservatism and class privileges. This was further cemented when in the following decades, in public universities, reformist ideals began to spread and left-wing politics gained ground.

The end of the *first wave* overlaps with the beginning of a *second wave* that is characterized by the emergence of elite secular universities in the 1960s and 1970s. In these years important processes of democratization as well as the reception of the reformist principles of 1918 take place in several Latin American university systems, principles that had not yet had an impact at the beginning of the century but which, in a context of strong social transformations, come to shake stagnant structures and forms. The institutions of the *second wave* are then used as "refuge" for university professors who oppose the co-government model, where student participation in decision-making represented a process of democratization of the university government that enabled a broadening of access to universities. It is precisely in these decades that far-reaching social changes took place, manifesting in an expansion of secondary education enrollment, which in turn generated greater pressure to access to higher education; resulting in changes in income devices such as the implementation of free-of-charge enrollment in some countries and in others the elimination of restrictive income systems. These changes provoked discontent in certain sectors that identified the loss of the elitist aspect of state institutions, the loss of prestige, the depreciation of their titles, together with growing student activism, as "shortcomings" of public institutions. So a new model of private university arose to guarantee processes of socialization and reproduction of class fractions, and, in this sense, it is a model that is opposed to the public university, but also to the religious private universities created in the *first wave* of expansion (Levi, 1991). Paradigmatic examples of this *second wave* include the Cayetano Heredia University in Peru (1961), the Pe-

dro Henríquez Ureña University in the Dominican Republic (1967), the Metropolitan University in Venezuela (1970) and the Francisco Marroquín University in Guatemala (1971); the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Studies in Mexico (1943) and the Andes University in Colombia (1948) are also recognized as part of this university model (García Guadilla, 2007). All these universities were founded as laic institutions, oriented to certain elite groups and with high academic standards, and established themselves as the opposite to public institutions.

The private sector's expansion, promoted by a religious sector characteristic of the *first wave*, was the product of an alliance between State and Church, which was traditional in the region in other levels of education systems, and under the principle of "freedom of teaching" achieves authorization for its creation, but also results in stipulations that will facilitate the subsequent creation of other private universities in the region (Rama, 2017). These had different degrees of intensity, complexity and effectiveness, in a context where states established -during democratic regimes- a 'benevolent' relationship towards public universities, based on financing and recognition of self-government. Likewise, the State not only enabled the operation of private institutions, but also supported them through financing and/or land donations; which, in some cases, was sustained over time through subsidies.

### **University privatization processes at the end of the 20th century: the third wave**

Since the 1980s, a constant creation of universities under another model can be observed, causing a new wave of expansion of private institutions. This *third wave* doesn't occur as a reaction to the "excessive" democratization like the *second wave*, but is rather a result of the limits to the expansion of these systems (Levy, 1991). This is how non-elitist secular institutions were created that would take in the growing and unsatisfied demand for access to existing public and private institutions, which is why they are referred to as universities of "surplus demand absorption". Although public universities showed clear limitations in incorporating new students who demanded higher education within the framework of restrictive budgets, the excess demand was not the result only of impossibilities in this sector. Private universities created in previous waves reaffirmed their elitist character, thus generating a surplus of demand that shifted towards a series of institutions that, although different in some cases, tend to be characterized by lower academic standards, lower tuition costs, an orientation towards professionalism and the job market, and being linked to credentialism (Fanelli and Balán, 1993; Fanelli, 1997; Krotsch, 1993).

The main social conditions that accelerated the creation of these institutions are the budget restrictions of public universities that, faced with a growing demand for

higher education, promoted the implementation of fees and selective admission processes. Hence, in the face of the state's passivity in terms of provision, more accessible private universities expanded for that lower income sector of the population that could not access state universities due to those growing restrictive systems. This wave of expansion of the private sector grows *enormous* as a result of the structural reform in higher education and its reorientation towards the market. Chile pioneered this reform in the region, becoming the most complete example, although Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil also had their own paths towards highly privatized and commodified systems, leading the way for the region. This process was accompanied by the defunding and de-hierarchization of the public sphere with the proliferation of "pro-market" discourses, and the notion that students and their families were the ones who should bear the cost of higher education, under two contradictory arguments: the payment of those who could do so would expand access, achieving greater equality; and charging for educational services was justified by high return rates, transforming students into consumers of higher education loans (Brunner, 2007).

Hence, 1980 is considered a pivotal moment in the expansion processes of private university institutions, since strong transformations began at the hands of movements of privatization in the region that, with the economic crisis of 1982, were strengthened, but also because at that time a series of transformations began to be implemented in some systems that would become a sign for what would come next in the context of fiscal crisis and subsequent economic adjustment (Fanelli and Balán, 1993). This higher education reform was part of a profound restructuring of relations between *states, markets and societies* (Vilas, 1997) that began in the 1980s and deepened and extended to more countries in the 1990s. In the region took place a redefinition of the State's role and a strong action in favor of promoting incorporation into the globalized world under market logic, with neoliberal doctrine as the ideological foundation of said transformations. Thus, a conceptual and political shift occurred: education ceased to be considered a citizen's right and became a commodity, and educational financing was no longer primarily regulated by the State for social and planning purposes, and started to be managed thinking of demand financing and the market (Barroso, 2005).

The university reform process in the region was promoted by international organizations that had an agenda focusing mainly in problems related to: institutional quality and the need to evaluate both institutions and careers; university tuitions, diversifying sources of financing and generating their own resources; limiting access and diversifying the system's offer to generate conditions of institutional competition. This way, concern for institution efficiency was installed on the basis of a diagnosis conditioned by the intervention of these new actors who promoted a homogeneous view of a "remedy for your illness" (Mollis, 2003). The reform's premises were based on the

idea of *government* and *institutional failures*, imposing a solution under the *most market*: “The assumption is that more competition, less regulation and greater use by governments of market-type mechanisms, will result in more productive, efficient, innovative and adaptive universities, all the while reducing the transaction costs caused by government intervention and bureaucratic regulations” (Brunner, 2006:4).

With the emergence of the “Examining State” the traditional relationship between State and university in various national systems was modified, which in the region meant greater intervention, disrupting the traditional margins of autonomy of institutions by transitioning to a kind of “remote management” of the system, with emphasis on quality and financing. As policy tools, conditional financing mechanisms combined with evaluation were introduced as a deliberate method of resource distribution through a technical and political body. Following that logic, the introduction of efficiency criteria for fund distribution would increase the State’s rationality and incidence, guiding the changes in specific areas of academic and institutional activity.

In this sense, one could say that towards the end of the 20th century there was a process of privatization of higher education promoted by the State that encouraged and generated the conditions for the sector’s expansion (Fanelli and Balán, 1993). Thus, budgetary adjustments were supported by governments now under the guiding principle of efficiency, which widened institutional and academic restrictions for access in the public sector. The implementation of more restrictive admissions with exams and/or quotas and, in some cases, together with tuition, contained enrollment in the sector, while new private institutions tended to accommodate the growing demand from sectors that did not find a place in public and state education (Levy, 1991). However, in countries where public universities did not implement devices that limited access thus maintaining the “open door” model, the stagnation or decrease in public resources allocated to institutional financing in a context of increased enrollment resulted in a decrease in budget per student, threatening the quality of higher education and worsening working conditions for teachers. This, coupled with the limits of the sector’s academic and institutional organization to offer studying conditions for those who were active in the labor market, meant that a considerable number of young students opted for the new institutions that arose in the heat of speeches of delegitimization of the public sector and promotion of the private sector. Moreover, the regression in financing of public universities also led to the deterioration of institutions, forcing them to search for their own resources, which was strongly promoted by the new discourse on the need to diversify sources of income. A clear example of this process of privatization or commodification of the university, is the modality of development of the quaternary level in the region, oriented not by a substantive development in terms of knowledge production, but by becoming a source of extra revenue for public universities, creating commodified spaces with the consequent incorporation of competitive practices that

contributed to an identity linked to the sale of services (Gentili and Saforcada, 2010).

In other words, in the period that opens with the end of the dictatorships of the 1980s and 1990s, under a strong neoliberal hegemony, we witness a process that accentuates two dimensions of commodification: on one hand, the defunding of public universities so that they become self-sufficient, generating their own resources or competing to access scarcer and more targeted resources; and, on the other, the elimination of the distinction between public and private with the market's own principles and criteria invading the institutional logics of the public sphere (Boaventura, 2004).

On the other hand, deliberate public policies that encouraged the expansion of the private sector did exist, based on the sanction of regulations that facilitated the authorization to create private university institutions, as well as a modification of existing customs and methods regarding licensing, accreditation and evaluation policies. At this point, the early interventions of governments such as Brazil in the 1970s and Chile in the 1980s stand out (Fanelli and Balán, 1993). On this subject, it is possible to note differences between the countries within the framework of the same regional trend, insofar as the reforms promoted by international organizations were not implemented in a linear manner. The different academic traditions and historical configurations of national higher education systems, as well as the actors' orientation and strategies, mediated the processes generating singularities. Some countries implemented changes that meant limits to the globally designed reformist agenda; other cases became the witness case of the intended reform. In particular, in some countries the market was freed within the framework of little to no state regulation, definitively transforming the physiognomy of university systems in the region. The "laissez faire" logic enabled a superlative development of tertiary institutions, often of dubious quality and degrees of little worth in the labor market, called "low-cost universities" or also pejoratively as "garage" or "duck" universities. These institutions offer careers that require little investment, for a relatively low economic cost, with minimal material and human resources, precarious infrastructure, and education of dubious quality. These processes developed in countries where profit was incentivized, like Peru, Brasil, Costa Rica, Mexico and Honduras. Meanwhile, in other countries such as Argentina, the private sector's growth gave place to the creation of government instances of regulation and the strengthening and development of existing spaces, thus limiting the expansion of universities.

With this third wave of university creation, the public and private binary model was left behind (Rama, 2017), giving way to strong processes of institutional diversification, forming a heterogenous institutional matrix in most countries. The catholic model of private institutions was replaced by a diverse mosaic of private institutions related to different religions as well as laic universities; elite universities; of large, me-

dium and minuscule size; profit and non-profit; some academic-oriented and some business-oriented; national and transnational; specialized in all disciplines or in some particular subjects; of in-person or distance learning; etc. Nevertheless, despite different characteristics, this configuration of university systems as a consequence of expansion via privatization shows a deep differentiation that resulted in a segmentation of those systems (Fanelli and Balán, 1993; Krotsch, 1993), thus generating doubt in the quality of the education given and setting boundaries to the democratization of access to knowledge.

### **Private university processes at the start of the 21st Century: the fourth wave**

With the turn of the Century, a new era led by new “post-neoliberal” governments transpired in most of Latin America, governments that had in common a consensus on the failure of past neoliberal policies. This strong political change that shattered the supremacy of the Washington Consensus gave way to a plethora of political processes and alliances between Latin American governments with the goal of consolidating a more powerful position in the international landscape. States also took a more central role in the implementation and orientation of policies, recovering their capacity to regulate and intervene, although differently in each country. In this context coexisted processes of schooling expansion, enrollment growth in higher education, increase in education financing, implementation of plans and programs of educational inclusion, expansion of public institution offer, increase in S&T budget; with processes of consolidation of evaluation and accreditation policies under productivist and technocratic principles, the institutionalization of *New Management* logics in public management and the multiplication of productivity measurement systems. At the same time, the private sector continued to expand through new undergraduate and postgraduate careers, distance education and institutional concentration.

The repositioning of the State and the right to education in international plans of action and national laws that were sanctioned in this period shows a clear break with the previous 90s’ consensus, and converged in a new agenda for the sector (Feldfeber and Saforcada, 2012). Because *Inclusivity* became the new paradigm for organizing education systems and education was declared a public good and a social right, new regulations emerged in almost all Latin America that built new program frameworks and specific missions for authorities built on the basis of a bigger presence from the State as a provider of the right to education. Also, the notion of educational equality is redefined not only in terms of entry but also in terms of permanence, linking and completion of studies, as well as access to different levels of education, thus expanding the rights spectrum and adding those of this new generation, con-

templating issues of cultural diversity and different social contexts in teaching and learning processes (Betancur, 2010), strengthening individual freedoms, but more importantly securing State responsibilities and obligations towards quality education that is public, free of charge and inclusive.

In the university sphere, a never-before-seen strategic and political consensus was established (Del Valle, 2018) causing a deeply meaningful conceptual change that proposed a new logic for higher education, expressed in the Final Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education of 2008. According to Rinesi, it was “a remarkable achievement [that] synthesized and crystalized in a text of utmost symbolic and political importance the spirit that drove all these changes, and explicitly shows, in a convincing and epigrammatic way, what may be the great legacy of those years (...) for the first time in our history [higher education] could be seen as a public and social good, a universal human right and the State’s responsibility (and also stated that it should still be seen as such in the future)” (2020: 63). This declaration’s immediate predecessors were the First Regional Conference on Higher Education held in 1996 in Cuba and the First World Conference about Higher Education (CMES) held in Paris in 1998, where a series of statements became irrevocable references in debates and university policy agendas to come, especially in Latin America. It was there that higher education was determined a public good and a right unbound from commercial regulation and that, therefore, the State has an important role in its funding. From that moment onwards, public and social began to be established as inescapable conceptual terms through which university policy frameworks would be discussed starting the new millenium (Del Valle, 2018).

Thus, by way of defining higher education as a public social good, Latin America and the Caribbean declare their rejection of the logics that promote its commodification and privatization, and by defining it as a universal human right, they assigned an inescapable responsibility to States, having to guarantee its funding (Del Valle, 2018). The Regional Conference on Higher Education of 2008 expressed the regional political and social changes that caused a series of modifications towards improving access to higher education. In some cases, those modifications slightly reconfigured long-standing devices and organization methods in university systems; while in others, new organization forms were achieved, plowing through selective and limiting mechanisms in enrollment systems. Generally speaking, these changes took place in the context of initiatives that proposed countering the 90s’ reforms in Latin America, which is to say, the logic that derived into proposals of privatization, tuition and selective mechanisms of enrollment, among other issues (Atairo y Camou, 2019).

With “educational inclusion” as an axis of the university’s agenda, new plans of action were implemented, directed at generating greater values of equality in access



as well as permanence and egress from the university system. For example, in Argentina, scholarship policies complemented unrestricted entry and a free of charge public university system; while in Brasil action was taken towards widening access to the university system, using scholarship systems to enroll passing through the private sector and developing plans of action with the goal of increasing the enrollment quota to ensure better access to public universities (Barreyro, 2006).

This new element in the university's agenda occurs in the context of a continuity of other topics despite the alternative political renovation in Latin America that settled a critical discourse of the previous decade's reforms (Chiroleu, 2011). With varying pace and nuance, the countries of the region started implementing evaluation policies that penetrated deep into the university system and were legitimized as an end in and of themselves. Nowadays, evaluation is still the biggest articulator in politics; although according to Chiroleu (2011) different national experiences allow us to tint this statement placing countries in a continuum from renovation to permanence, placing Venezuela and Mexico respectively on each end, and Brasil and Argentina towards the middle. In some nations, adjustments to evaluation policies were made, with the objective of *improvement* rather than *assurance* of quality, although no substantive reform was achieved; while in others where poor quality private universities spread, processes of institutional evaluation and accreditation were implemented, with the aim of guaranteeing a minimum standard of quality to allow institutions to function, rather than orienting change towards improving them. These evaluation devices were legitimized in the Regional Conference on Higher Education of 2008, by way of the declaration which expresses: "Considering the immense task faced by countries of Latin America and the Caribbean of expanding coverage, both the public and private sectors are obliged to provide quality and pertinent higher education. Therefore, governments should strengthen accreditation mechanisms that guarantee the transparency and condition of public service".

Regulation increase generated a particular dynamic towards the private sector: by building competitive frameworks by improving standards of quality, an impact in costs forces the private sector to try to revert it to withstand new demands (Rama, 2017, 2021). Therefore, new transformations that could be referred to as a *fourth wave of privatization* of higher education take place, built on the previous irrational institution expansion that marked the 90s and resulted in an oversupply of local institutions, characterized in terms of quality and price. According to Rama (2017), this new phase has a distinctive facet: unlike the previous institution creation process, this time concentration of the supply is what gives room to the creation of a new university model that works on a bigger scale than institutions that offer pedagogic innovations such as distance education; or in academic offer based in international faculties like student mobility and globalized curricula; as well as incorporating practical elements such as formation through internships (Rama, 2017). These new formats and methods



allowed the private sector to respond to higher education demand, even in a context of regulation and cost increase, and sustain superfluous revenues.

This process, which contributes to the consolidation of a university model that clashes with the traditional public university model of the region, pressuring it into looking for innovations and entrepreneurship (García Guadilla, 2003); is linked to greater identification of education systems as a business sector in the context of a more dynamic and volatile global economy, and through the reconfiguration of public services establishes education as a market niche with tantalizing prospects of growth, its high revenue placing it in the crosshair of the private sector. In particular, private higher education has had an exponential growth worldwide under various property formats: individual owners, companies with commercial and for-profit interests, international franchises of university campuses, companies providing services or support to these new actors, investment and foreign property acquisition from local institutions, among others. Thus, a new characteristic of this new wave is the presence of new providers on top of the “traditional” ones (Rodríguez Gómez, 2003). In the region, highlighted are business groups with important participation from international groups in person or through cross-border education.<sup>4</sup>

*Institutional concentration* is characteristic of this wave, product of mergers and/or acquisitions of institutions by local or foreign groups of low-tuition universities of poor quality and receptors of more public fiscalization, for which selling was a better option than shutting down for not meeting the minimum criteria. These operations are carried out by publicly traded companies, as well as foundations and associations. This introduction of publicly traded companies (or S.As) in the region was simultaneous to the introduction of foreign institutions via local institution acquisitions in countries such as Brazil, Peru, Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico (Rama, 2017). These transnational groups are tightly linked to “for profit” higher education. This key aspect of this new phase reinforces higher education internationalization processes in the region, and settles a shift from the concept of “educational good” towards profit becoming the main focus of these institutions. Even in countries where the legal framework did not allow for “for-profit” education and no educational institutions were managed by publicly traded companies, there is a proliferation of foundations or associations linked to institutions, through which benefits are distributed to their economic owner groups. On this regard, the CRES’s declaration in 2008 warned that “Education offered by trans-national providers, exempt from the control and guidance of national States, favors education that is de-contextualized and in which the principles of pertinence and equity are displaced. This increases social exclusion, fosters inequality, and consolidates underdevelopment.

<sup>4</sup> An example of the “new” international higher education providers is the Laureate Group. For more details on the origins and modalities of the group see: Rodríguez Gómez, R. (2009)

## **Oscillating movements and challenges in guaranteeing the right to higher education during the fourth wave**

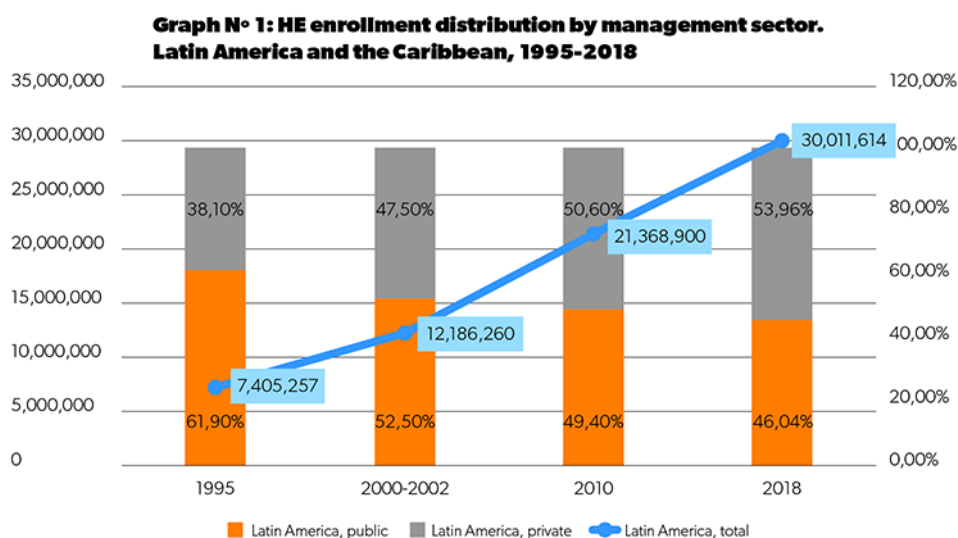
Over the last few years, we have been witness to numerous oscillating movements in political subjects in the region. The changes that took place in several countries laid the groundwork for the creation of a new cycle of neoliberal conservative hegemony for the whole country that brings back reformist principles from the 90s, but with strong influence from neo-conservative elements. In this scenario, new adjustment modalities and State reforms had their impact in the education sphere, under the form of budget cuts, policy and program dismantling, defunding and budget underuse. Also, this was accompanied by ideas that gave way to the resurgence of the market as a regulator of the social sphere and permeated the education sector, installing strong conceptual discussions about education as a good. We also witness in this period movements of resistance and condemnation, of various forms and depths, towards the advancement of precarization and commodification in day-to-day life, which were met, in most cases, with repression.

In higher education, ten years after the Second Regional Conference on Higher Education in Cartagena de Indias, coinciding with the centenary of the University Reform, on June 2018 in Córdoba (Argentina) the Third Conference took place, in a context plagued by political tendencies that forced various actors to take a defensive stance towards what could be a step backwards from 2008's declaration. In this sense, the Conference was the stage for various disputes between actors with opposite interests; however, the final declaration "not only revalidated the principle establishing higher education as a universal human right, but also drew notice to the threat in the form of the advancement of commodification in education and knowledge, pushed by international financial capital, incorporating as well several aspects relevant to the democratization of this sector, such as gender equality, the recognition of the cultural diversity in our region, or opening the notion of academic activity to include the Arts as one of its main dimensions" (Socolovsky, 2019: 76). This clearly shows the tensions present in the field of university politics towards the end of the 2010s, which would be revitalized and further developed in the context of deep transformations societies in general and education systems in particular had to face due to the COVID-19 Pandemic at the start of 2020. This scenario shows important questions and concerns of a new expansion and reproduction of privatization and commodification intentions, as well as a strong reappearance of market logics in the education field arguing and stressing the process of making educational rights a reality.

## Landscape of a hyper-privatized region: higher education over the last decade

The analysis of some classic indicators of higher education during the last decade allow us to assure that, even with the direction change convalidated by the 2008 Conference, not only did the tendency towards privatization not change, it even developed further. We will try to show an image of the dimensions of this phenomenon in the region with the available data, which is small and in some cases not continuous.

An analysis of the evolution of enrollment from 1995 to 2018 shows that, in a context of system expansion and widening of access, there was large growth in both sectors. However, while the public sector went from 4.500.000 students to 13.500.000, the private sector showed greater growth going from 3.000.000 to 16.000.000, meaning that the public fraction of enrollment decreased from 61,9% to 46,04% over the course of 23 years, reverting the tendency between both areas.



Source: own elaboration with data from Red ÍndicES, 2020.

According to data from 2018, almost 54% of the region's students are enrolled in private institutions. From this variable, Latin America can be characterized as *hyper-privatized*, as more than half of its student population attends private sector institutions (Saforcada y Rodríguez Golisano, 2019), an aspect shared with the South Asia region, while the global medium is around the 33%, and regions like Europe represent only 13% of the total (UIS-UNESCO, 2018).

As we can observe on Chart N°1, during 2018 in countries like Chile the private sector neared 85% of enrollment; followed by Peru, Brazil and Puerto Rico with 70%; El Salvador 69%; and finishing with the Dominican Republic with 57% and Costa Rica and Colombia with close to 50%. In contrast, Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay show less than 30% of their enrollment belonging to the private sector, as well as the special case of Cuba with 100% of their enrollment rates taken by the public sector. Using the classification criteria proposed by García Guadilla (2001), we find that with the exception of three countries (Cuba, Uruguay and Bolivia), all the others have a mild to large private university sector, with a tendency towards the larger side of the spectrum (meaning that they concentrate in the private sector 25% to 50%, or more than 50% of their enrollment, respectively).

**Chart N°1. Enrollment in the private sector in Latin America and the Caribbean, from 2010 to 2018**

<b>Country</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2010-2018</b>
<b>Latin America</b>	<b>50,60%</b>	<b>53,96%</b>	3,36%
Chile	81,89%	84,04%	2,15%
Peru	62,57%	74,74%	12,17%
Brazil	71,50%	73,41%	1,91%
Puerto Rico	73,10%	71,27%	-1,83%
El Salvador	66,56%	69,05%	2,49%
Dominican Republic	50,69%	57,43%	6,74%
Colombia	44,61%	49,75%	5,14%
Costa Rica	50,75%	49,15%	-1,60%
Ecuador	37,68%	45,10%	7,42%
Honduras	40,13%	45,02%	4,89%
Mexico	32,26%	35,23%	2,97%
Panama	36,36%	33,39%	-2,97%
Bolivia	21,05%	22,18%	1,13%
Argentina	20,57%	24,57%	4,00%
Uruguay	17,03%	10,45%	-6,58%
Cuba	0,00%	0%	0%

Data for 2018: Ecuador, 2015; Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, 2017.

Data for 2010: Brazil and Costa Rica, 2011, Ecuador, 2012

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Red ÍndiceS, 2020.

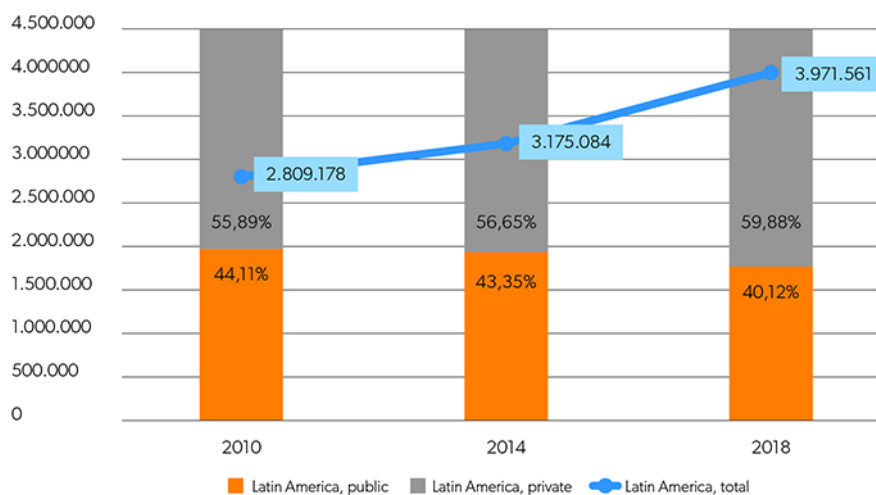
By comparing data from 2010 to 2018, we can observe in which countries the private sector has grown: the standout cases being Peru, where the growth between 2010

and 2018 represented a 12 point difference; and Ecuador<sup>5</sup> and the Dominican Republic, where the increase reached around 7 points during the same period.

This characterization of a *hyper-privatized* region by analyzing the enrollment rate, is only strengthened when observing egress rates. In a lapse of eight years, the amount of graduates from higher education in region increased by over a million people, going from 2.809.178 in 2010 to 3.971.561 in 2018<sup>6</sup>, with a particular increase in distance education graduates, especially in Brazil, Honduras, Colombia, Mexico and the Dominican Republic (Red ÍndicES, 2022).

The private sector has a central role in this statistic, increasing their participation by 4%: while in 2010 they represented 56% of graduates in the region, nowadays that number is up to 60%. A more relevant fact is that this is an ongoing tendency and represents one more point than the enrollment growth. This means, in practical terms, that 6 out of 10 graduates from the region egress from private higher education institutes.

**Graph N° 2: HE graduate evolution and distribution by managing sector Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010-2018**



Source: Own elaboration with data from the Red ÍndicES, 2020

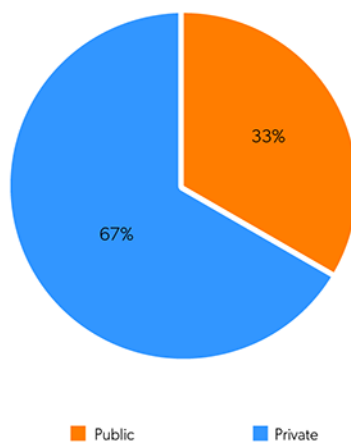
<sup>5</sup> Although it has to be taken into account that the last data is from 2015.

<sup>6</sup> On average 58 students egress -mainly from the undergraduate level (CINE 6)- from every 10 thousand people, with sharp differences among countries: while in Chile and Costa Rica this number goes up to 90 graduates; in Bolivia, El Salvador, Honduras and Uruguay it goes down to less than 40 (Landscape of Higher Education in Iberoamerica, 2018, OEI).

Adding to this analysis based on student variables (enrollment and graduation), the second traditional indicator pointing towards Latin America being *hyper-privatized* is the configuration of their institutional offer.

As we explained earlier, the expansion of institutional offer took different forms in each country, but in regional terms it has shown steady and slowly accelerating growth. Towards the middle of the 20th Century, around 75 university institutions existed; and in 1975, it is calculated that approximately 330 of these establishments had been created, going up to 700 in 1990, with the private sector owning more than half (Krotsch, 2001). Product of greater dynamism that gave way to institution proliferation, in 1995 the count went up to about 850 universities, and then up to 2752 in the first years of the new millenium (Cinda, 2007), growing the offer by almost four times in a few years. According to the last available data, 4081 university institutions were recognized in total, of which 67% belong to the private sector (2753). That is to say, 2 out of every 3 universities in Latin America are private.

**Graph N° 3: University institutions by management sector. Latin America, 2014. N=4081**



Source: own elaboration using data from CINDA, 2016.

This notably privatized distribution of the offer shows more intense characteristics in countries like Chile, Brazil, El Salvador, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Peru and Costa Rica; where the private sector officiates as the main provider of higher education. In some particular countries, such as the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay, private higher education expands around a single public institution, achieving high representation rates. In Chart N°2 it can be observed that,

with the exception of Cuba where there are no private institutions, in all other countries the private sector represents more than 50% of institutional offer, with Ecuador and Argentina being the only examples closer to parity between public and private.

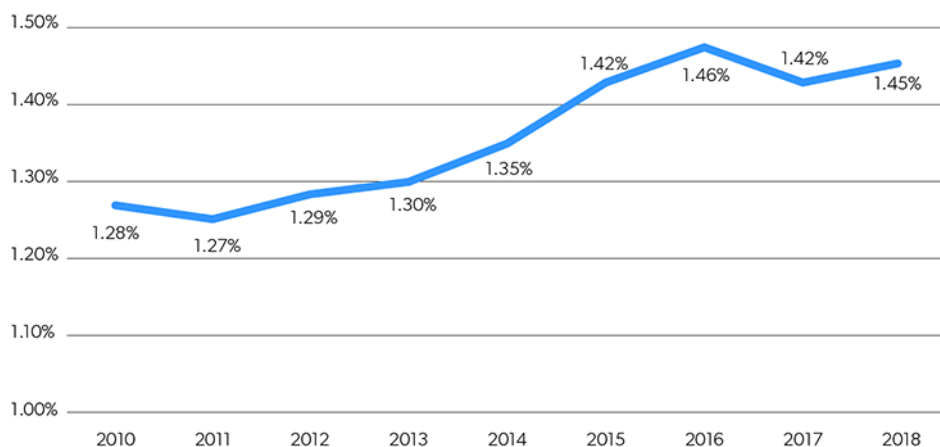
**Chart N°2. Number of university institutions from the public and private sectors, 2014**

<b>Number of Institutions</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Public Sector</b>	<b>Private sector</b>	<b>Private sector %</b>
Dominican Republic	31	1	30	97
El Salvador	24	1	23	96
Guatemala	15	1	14	93
Costa Rica	58	5	53	91
Nicaragua	57	6	51	89
Panama	33	5	28	85
Paraguay	53	8	45	85
Uruguay	5	1	4	80
Chile	60	16	44	73
Colombia	201	59	142	71
Honduras	20	6	14	70
Bolivia	59	19	40	68
México	2667	851	1816	68
Venezuela	72	25	47	65
Brazil	342	122	220	64
Peru	142	51	91	64
Argentina	131	66	65	50
Ecuador	59	33	26	44
Cuba	52	52	-	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4081</b>	<b>1328</b>	<b>2753</b>	<b>67</b>

Source: CINDA, 2016

Lastly, the analysis of a third traditional variable allows characterization of the degree of privatization in higher education systems and its relative positioning in a privatization map of higher education in the region: level and structure of spending. Graph N°4 shows a substantial increase in investment in higher education in Latin America, which went from 1,28% in 2010 to 1,45% in 2018; bringing it close to 1,5% of countries from the OECD.

**Graph N° 4: total higher education expenditure as GDP percentage.  
Latin America, 2010-2018**



Fuente: Red ÍndicES, 2022.

This increase can be observed as well by analyzing total spending in higher education between 2010 and 2018, which went from 92 billion to 135 billion dollars in parity power purchasing (PPP); while public expenditure in higher education rose from 75 billions to 109 billions during the same years. Both register a sustained and similar increase in terms of growth rate, amounting to approximately 45% in that period.<sup>7</sup>

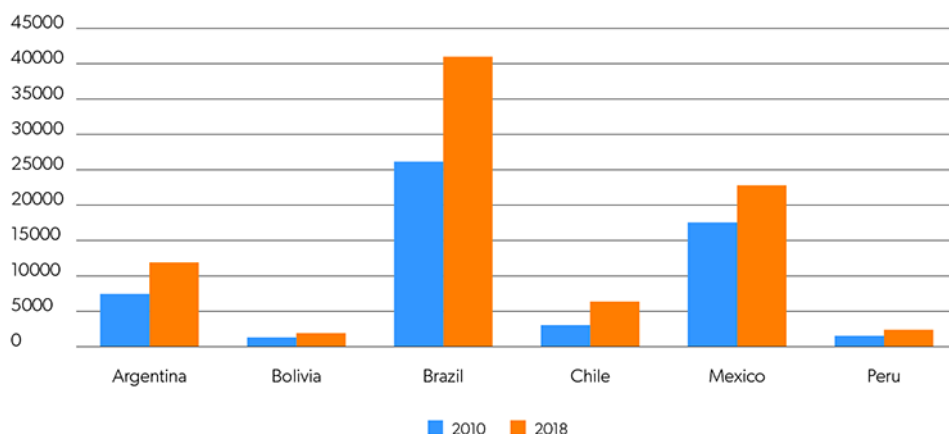
Public expenditure shows an increase in all countries of the region. Graph N°5 shows only up-to-date data from various countries<sup>8</sup>, and lets us observe the increase in public spending from 2010 to 2018, in countries with both higher and lower percentages of privatized education. As we previously mentioned, public spending in the last almost 20 years is related to a revaluation of public offer in the context of post-neoliberalism.

<sup>7</sup> Data from Red ÍndicES, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Honduras, Costa Rica and Ecuador also registered increases higher than 100% for the 2010 to 2015 period, the only data available going up to that year.



**Graph N° 5: public higher education expenditure (PPP) in selected countries. 2010-2018**



Source: Red IndicES, 2022.

In the context of privatization expansion in higher education enrollment a key factor to analyze is the input from students and their families through tuition payments. By separating in public and private our analysis, one can see clear differences in regards to expenditure structure, which further shows the degree of privatization in higher education systems. Below is disaggregated and up-to-date data from various countries. In Chart N°3 it can be observed that in 2010 Chile and Colombia showed great participation from the private sector in the funding of higher education of 67% and 48% respectively, while countries like Argentina and Mexico had a lower percentage of approximately 25%. When compared to the data of 2018, an increase in public sector involvement can be discerned in Argentina and Colombia, and specially in Chile by increasing from 33% to 46%, although still being the country with the highest private expenditure in the region in 2018.

**Chart N°3. Total expenditure in higher education sorted by sector. 2010-2018**

Country	2010		2018	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
Argentina	76%	24%	84%	16%
Chile	33%	67%	46%	54%
Colombia	52%	48%	54%	46%
Mexico	74%	26%	62%	38%

Source: Own elaboration with data from the Red IndicES, 2020. Data from Chile and Colombia is from 2017.

As a corollary to the analysis of these three “traditional” aspects that help characterize and place higher education systems in a privatization map of the region, the notion of *hyper-privatized* systems is reasserted, whose expansion occurred more gradually during the 20th Century and accelerated towards the turn of the century, although with different tendencies within.

## **New methods of privatization of Latin American universities: focusing on research and funding**

Although the “landscape” of tendencies in the 2010s on higher education private sector expansion in terms of amount of institutions, enrollment and quantity of graduates, is significant and faces us to a hectic reality of this level; this landscape, clear in numbers, does not represent the diverse processes it involves. At this point, we would like to point especially to the existence of a new method of privatization that tends to *equate private and public*. This tendency is both material and symbolic, and manifests in diverse normative and regulatory devices, as well as legitimizing speeches and concepts by various agents.

The symbolic side is linked to the idea of giving the same treatment to public and private institutions, equating their interests and hiding the fact that the latter answer to individual interests. A perception is built normatively and ideologically that public and private are the same. Subsidiarily, the expansion of bigger private universities with lower costs and poor quality, drove the more traditional and older private institutions, with a mindset that is less or not at all commercial, to position themselves in a symbolic place similar to that of public institutions, moving the bar between public and private towards a distinction of commercial or not, or of good or bad quality; all the while weakening other political ideals encompassed in the public sphere.

The material aspect is linked to logics and distribution channels of public resources. We have identified the process through which the limit between public and private in relation to public funds’ flow started to blur, in some cases to the point of not existing at all, mainly in relation to research funding, scholarships and student loans. With apparent neutrality, programs or common competitions are established for both sectors, coming off as egalitarian and, thus, fair; but in practice they are the window through which a sizable and growing portion of public resources gets redirected towards the private sector with no political cost or discontent in the public sphere.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Adding to this, in various countries private universities benefit from public resources, directly through subsidies and indirectly by being exempt of taxes, which translates into a substantive resource reception.

This paced erasure of the limits between public and private give room for market principles and criteria within public institutions, becoming arbiters of the system. This growing process of privatization or commodification in universities has strong correlations for public universities, but also for the whole public sphere since, in addition to the various levels and grades of university privatization observed in each country, market logic starts to be imposed.

In this section, we will explore two dimensions that should shed light on the modalities these processes can assume as well as the transversality of the phenomenon. In first place, the dimension encompassing university research; and in second, its funding. In both cases, special emphasis will be made on certain aspects that illustrate how this frontier between public and private starts to weaken, and its effects on privatization and commodification.

### **Privatization and commodification of research: hegemony of the productivist model**

The insertion of market logics advances over diverse institution functions such as education, extension and transference, but has a special role in the field of research. Even when only around 5% of universities in the region could be considered as research-oriented under the so-called 'humboldtian model', which is supposed to be a systemic combination of research and teaching (Brunner, 2014), a growing tendency can be observed towards placing it as the hegemonic model, by way of processes looking to designate research as main indicator of quality. It is contradictory, though, that very few university institutions manage to integrate teaching, research and extension into a single model; with most institutions having a more credentialist model.<sup>10</sup>

Inside the field of higher education, research and publications have been consolidated as a key element in institution and docent-researcher evaluation systems. Under a number of arbitrary premises, "research" is linked to "quality", which in turn is associated with "amount of papers". This way, research is consolidated as *the* activity to be carried out by universities and starts to operate as a reference point and as an objective towards which institutions should guide their efforts, mediated by university policies steer in that direction, shaping a field of tensions towards a scientific model guided by commodification logic. This has a deep impact on teaching and research working conditions caused by the demands of high productivity levels, met with the

<sup>10</sup> To further illustrate, according to the available data, if number of publications is used as a measurement of research development, around 80% of university institutions in the region that conduct research publishes between one and 250 publications in the span of five years (2007-2013), while only 86 institutions (5%) places itself at the top of the spectrum, declaring a productivity of over 3000 articles published during the same period (Informe educación superior en Iberoamérica, 2016).

publication of research results in indexed journals. This phenomenon is promoted by a proliferation of public policies that incentivize this model, as they tend to associate funding to the indicators mentioned previously, boosting a strongly productivist logic that forces its actors to compete for resources.

These hegemonic university model and knowledge production logics, that turned legitimate while being installed bluntly in the region and using Chile's model as a beacon, are settled in systems with scarce research traditions and incipient and precarious systems of science and technology (S&T). The predominance of this model, pressuring traditions and limiting other possible development, not only represents a minoritarian group of institutions, but also has a strong productivist and commodifying bias, consolidating as the only valid framework for knowledge production. In this section S&T region indicators are analyzed, evidencing how the blurring of public-private limits manifests symbolically and materially, and how privatization, commodification and foreignizing apply in the scientific field.

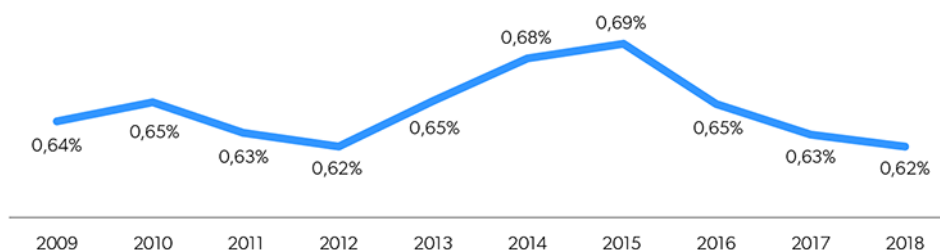
### **R&D expenditure: State predominance and public fund privatization**

Over the last few decades, in a global context where knowledge has a strategic role towards capital appreciation, and in a regional context of increased S&T relevance, there is a notable increment in funds designated to this field. This is particularly relevant to higher education systems given that they are central to the development of research and development (R&D) activities and employ the majority of researchers (OEI, 2019).

If we consider total R&D expenditure by country between 2008 and 2017, both in the public and private sectors, a strong growth of 42% can be observed, going from 43 billion dollars to more than 63 billion. Likewise, the change in political and economic context over the last few years is clear, affecting resources aimed at S&T, showing decreasing numbers. As such, from 2016 there has been a decrease of said resources, in countries like Brazil and Mexico who have the largest R&D investment in the region, and in countries with lower numbers as well, such as Colombia, Chile and Costa Rica; who even displayed high levels of growth at the start of the decade in question, but later followed the same decreasing tendency (RICYT, 2019).

This same process can be observed using another indicator, such as R&D expenditure in relation to GDP, which trended upwards from 2009 to 2015 (going from 0,64% to 0,69%), and later decrease back to 0,62% by 2018:

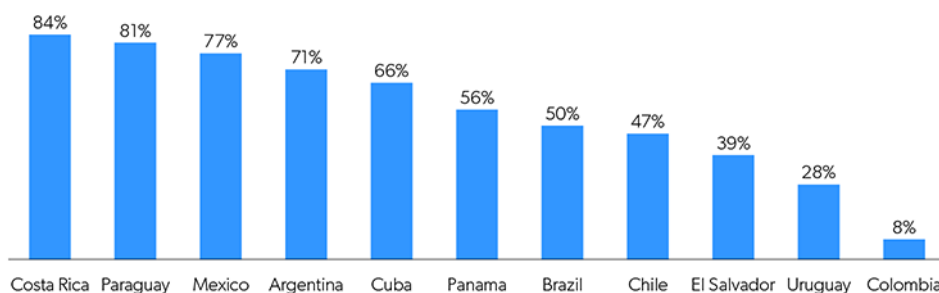
**Graph N° 6: R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP.  
Latin America, 2009-2018**



Source, RICYT, 2020.

Nonetheless, despite the upwards trend, comparatively, the region finds itself beneath by far from other regions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, R&D investment in Latin America has distinguishable aspects. On one side, it shows a strong concentration of investments, seeing as Brazil alone represents 65% of the region's investment, with Mexico having 13%, Argentina 8%, Colombia 3%, Chile 2%, and the remaining 10% split among the other countries. On the other side, there is a strong presence of State funding, which manifests in a participation of 58% in total funding, while companies represent 36%. It is a situation inverse to the reality of most central countries, where businesses are dominant in this aspect. Finally, there is strong variance from country to country on this indicator, using the Colombian case as reference with only 8% of R&D funding coming from the public sector (Graph N°7).

**Graph N° 7: Government presence in R&D funding.  
Latin America and the Caribbean, 2017**



Source: RICYT, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Iberoamerica: 0,74% (2018), OECD countries 2,47% (2019), Spain: 1,24%, Portugal: 1,36%, Canada: 1,56%, USA: 2,83%, Japan: 3,2%, South Korea: 4,6% (OECD: <https://data.oecd.org/rd/gross-domestic-spending-on-r-d.htm>).

In regards to resource exercise, data indicates that the government sector uses 27% of resources, companies 30%, and higher education systems 42%. Although in this case, it is not possible to discern how much of this total is used by state institutions (be they companies or higher education establishments), and how much by the private sector. This is a key factor, seeing as the field of S&T funding is where various public fund distribution mechanisms operate redirecting resources to the private sector, be it by competition funds that treat both sectors equally, or specific funds that aim at S&T development in private universities, among others. This is exemplified by Chile's case, a country with research traditions and a high level of productivity logic institutionalization; as well as the Dominican Republic, with strong science development, but following the same parameters. Even in Argentina with deep public traditions, State resources get redirected to private universities via the same mechanisms.

In other words, the increase in R&D spending in the region over the last few decades, was supported fundamentally by the State, and was later utilized by all sectors. It is precisely in that situation that a key factor of privatization finds itself, seeing as the increase of public S&T spending was destined towards universities as the main R&D producers in the region, whilst driving these to improve and settle their research systems through public policies that pushed for development under market logic. This is the main scenario where the blurring of limits between public and private operated, as a big part of those funds were redirected to private institutions.

### **Productivism and market at the core of regional knowledge production**

In the region, there is clear influence from market themes such as competition, productivity and efficiency in universities, which are the main establishments dedicated to knowledge production in most countries of the region. This conditions one of the main ways of privatization or commodification in universities, causing a strong impact in the division between academic work and teachers' and researchers' work conditions.

Measurement of productivity in terms of the amount of publications in journals that are highly regarded internationally has become the beacon guiding knowledge production in S&T systems across the globalized world. This carries not only the universalization at a global scale of *one type* of evaluation based on *one type* of production, but also has effects related to the devaluation of other forms of production and distribution of knowledge, such as books; the homogenization of English as the international communication language; the transformation of national formats of knowledge circulation; the proliferation of wage incentives for highly regarded journal publications; among others. These processes have strong effects in publication

styles in the academic community, both in central and peripheral countries (Beigel y Gallardo, 2021).

This dynamic has an accelerated growing gravitation of transnational companies of scientific journals, indexes and knowledge production of scientometrics, companies that act in a field of political possibilities that prioritize giving private solutions to public issues (Ball, 2014; Leher, 2009). Inside this logic that is increasingly imposed in institutions, but mainly in academic work, there are two databases, Scopus and Web of Science, that lead the publication market.<sup>12</sup>

These two giants of indexing are part of the transnational editorial market, which takes on oligopolistic characteristics as six of the biggest editorials - 5 of them private - control 50% of indexed scientific publications worldwide, expressing the growing inequality from a geopolitical perspective in production and distribution of knowledge.

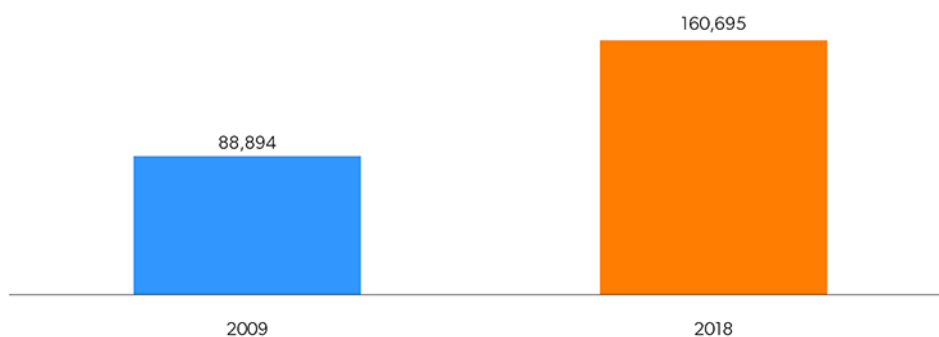
These huge corporations control the market, imposing criteria, rules and their own values, and contribute to the loss of university sovereignty over produced knowledge as well as the makings of a model that disciplines and homogenizes produced knowledge, adding the evaluation of multiple processes that result in an "impact factor" university institution, ignoring the public and leaning towards knowledge privatization. This is also another public fund redirection method towards private coffers, since frequently part of researcher's subsidies are spent in publication, as well as the large sums libraries and research centers spend to have access to these private databases.<sup>13</sup>

Analyzing the evolution of indicators in regards to publications from the region in these databases allows evaluation of the impact of these logics. Firstly, between 2009 and 2018, the amount of articles published in Scopus scientific journals by Latin American and Caribbean authors grew by 99%, going from 88.894 to 160.695 publications. If we consider the production agency of this large number of publications, towards the year 2017 90% of them had university participation, a figure that increased from 2010, when the percentage was close to 77%. There is clear disparities between countries, as universities participated in scientific production up to 92% in Chile or 88% in Brazil, but nations such as Panama or Cuba gather most of its production in national or international research centers, or in the case of Argentina, in a government institution (CONICET) (Situation report N°5, OCTS-OEI).

<sup>12</sup> Scopus has a database that includes around 20 thousand scientific publications, while Web of Science has the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE), that picks up all contributions publishable in indexed science and technology journals from Clarivate Analytics (previously known as Thomson Reuters) and represents around 12 thousand journals.

<sup>13</sup> Documentary "Las paradojas del Nihilismo", chapter 3: "Publica o Muere". Producciones Pliegue, June 2020. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjSArdv5cNY>

**Graph N° 8: Evolution in SCOPUS publication quantity. Latin America.**



Source: Red IndicES, 2020.

In this indicator's case, almost all countries had an important annual variation, in some casos with jumps of over 200%, mainly those that had very low participation thresholds at the beginning of the period. One characteristic reiterated in the region's data analysis is the inequality among countries and overrepresentation by Brazil, who provides 51% of publications, followed from afar by Mexico's 16%, Argentina and Chile with 9%, Colombia with 8%, Ecuador with 3% and Peru with 2%. It is noteworthy that Peru, Ecuador and Colombia are the nations with the highest growth volume and rate in that period, the three countries that have, together with Brazil, Chile and Mexico, deeply privatized higher education systems.

A similar movement, although in a smaller scale, can be seen with SCI publications, which went from 67.929 in 2009 to 113.190 in 2018, showing 67% growth. One part of this upgrowth can be explained through the increase of presence of the region's journals in this database (RICYT, 2013), which simultaneously shows the editorial policy tendency in the region, where these logics have taken root. The country distribution here is barely different from Scopus's, Brazil leading the region with 59.744 publications by 2019, even though the number is still far from that of countries like Spain, Canada or the USA who have more than six times the number of publications in Latin America and the Caribbean. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that Latin America and the Caribbean is the most dynamic region considering the 2009-2018 period, in which its growth is larger than Iberoamerica's (54%) and the World's (36%). In other words, although with relatively scarce contributions on a global scale, it is one of the regions with larger growth, which goes to show the impact this format of knowledge distribution has had on its universities.



The other main S&T result indicator in measurement systems are patents. Their analysis allows appreciating a dimension that specially affects knowledge sovereignty, and hints at other aspects of privatization processes, such as foreignizing. Of all 60.212 patents requested in Latin America and the Caribbean in 201, only 20% were solicited by residents of the country, while of the total 21.828 patents granted by intellectual property offices in each country, only 11% were given to residents.

This shows a strong presence from foreign businesses that protect products in the region's markets, and whose innovation strategies are fundamentally focused on foreign developed technology acquisition and integration (CINDA, 2015), showing a clear *foreignizing* of the numerous knowledge and intellectual property production processes in the region, as well as an uneven distribution of knowledge production capacity on a global scale.

### **New funding allocation methods in the region's universities: from financing the offer to financing the demand**

In the context of the CRES's declaration in 2008<sup>14</sup>, as stated in section 2, there was a sharp increase in university budgets in most of the region's countries. Nonetheless, this auspicious situation goes hand in hand with the introduction of demand funding as the public budget's allocation model, altering the offer funding model that historically took precedence in the region (García de Fanelli, 2019), creating difficulties in public resource distribution plans. This modality, while promoted by international organisms since the 90s and implemented in some countries' basic education, is now a novelty at this level. The changes introduced to university funding a few decades before, affecting the historical "in blocks" fund allocation model for institutions, centered around introducing instruments as formulae, specific allocation contracts and program-contracts<sup>15</sup>, at the same time promoting the diversification of income sources for public universities deriving to the introduction of market logic.

During the 21st Century, in the context of a predominant paradigm of inclusion that establishes itself as the core principle in the formation of regional policies, a good

<sup>14</sup> The CRES expresses that "Satisfying increasing social demands for higher education requires increasing equity-based policies for entry, and creating new public support mechanisms for students (scholarships, student residencies, health and meal services, as well as academic guidance) designed to make possible their permanence and good performance in the systems" (CRES, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> These *formulae* usually include input indicators, trying to approximate the average study cost per student, sorted by field of study and level, as well as the utilization of weighters related to the improvement of some indicators, such as graduation rate and real duration of studies. In these cases, public fund allocation is done on the basis of university functioning results. Contracts, which can be assigned through competition of adjudication, can adopt different models according to performance of program-contract, and endanger future action by institutions (García Guadilla, 2017; García de Fanelli, 2019).

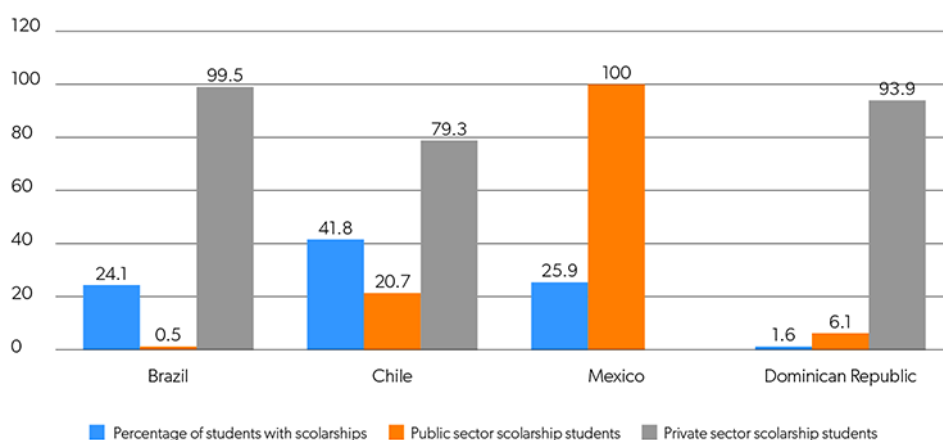
part of the increasing public funds gets distributed through mechanisms that follow demand, as they are destined towards students, mainly through grants and loans. Through this process, scholarship funding, even though aimed at facilitating access to higher education, especially for unfavoured sectors, covers up the growth of demand funding and -considering the high privatization values in the region, as well as the wealth of countries with highly selective public systems- implies an ensuing redirection of public funds towards private institutions.

Aside from the differences between each device (grants in general consist of tuition to enroll and/or payment of public or private institutions and do not suppose any financial compromise from the students, while loans or credits generally involve financial entities or banks and rely on families getting into debt to sustain educational trajectories), the outcome is that instead of funding going directly to institutions (offer funding), it is instead handed to students, mediated by some kind of academic and/or economic requirement, and afterwards is handled by the institution with their own criteria. Given an institutional matrix dominated by the private sector, public capital ends up in private accounts.

This can be further observed by analyzing public expenditure composition. Even though in most countries *teacher and staff salaries* are the main component in public spending, followed by *goods and services* and, in a smaller scale, *grants and subsidies*; in cases such as Chile and Brazil, a large portion is designated to this last item. Both countries have widened higher education access through the private sector and have been characterized in previous paragraphs as 'highly privatized', setting tendencies for the region by implementing broad scholarship systems and a "free-of-charge" policy (by tuition payments from the State) in Chile's case, or through the Student Financing Fund (FIES) and the University for All Program (PROUNI) in Brazil's. In other words, the implementation of policies that are conceived with inclusion and democratization as goals, end up greatly benefiting private sectors because State funding gets redirected towards them.

Likewise, if we analyze the destination of these funds the argument can be made that any demand funding in highly privatized systems, as is the case in most of the region, strengthens the private sector's dominance. In Graph N°9, public funding allocation to students is analyzed for four selected countries. Firstly, it can be observed that the proportion of grant students varies among them, though a high percentage indicates that the final destination of those funds is the private sector (with the exception of Mexico where scholarships are granted exclusively to public sector students) (OEI, 2019). Almost all grants in Brazil and the Dominican Republic are for students from private universities, and in Chile's case, this number goes up to 80%, although in this case it should be noted that public university students also have to pay tuition.

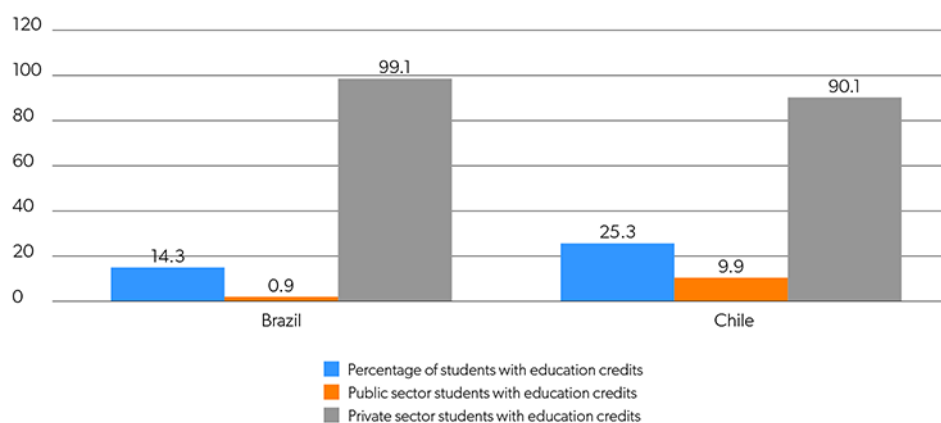
**Graph N° 9: Percentage of scholarship students by management sector. Selected countries, Latin America, 2017\***



Source: OEI Report, 2019. \* Dominican Republic, 2015.

The same thing happens with credit systems (Graph N°10): Chile distinguishes itself for the percentage of undergraduate students that receive education loans<sup>16</sup> and, as is Brazil's case, the bigger part is directed towards students from the private sectors (although in this case with a lower percentage over the total number of students) (OEI, 2019).

**Graph N° 10: Percentage of students with education credits by management sector. Selected countries, Latin America, 2017**



Source: own elaboration over chart from OEI Report, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> There are various loan modalities in the region. In some cases, such as Chile, these are financed by public and/or private bank entities and the State functions as endorser and guarantor; in others, Colombia for example, they are administered directly by a government financing entity. As formats are varied in regards to expenditures being financed, requisites, repayment methods; the need for families to fall in debt to access higher education, and the role of States as mediators with the financing systems, become common denominators. (<https://portal.beneficiosestudiantiles.cl/becas/creditos-de-educacion-superior> and <https://web.icetex.gov.co/creditos>)

Other data stemming from the analysis of selected national cases reassert this statement. In the Dominican Republic's case, data from 2016 shows that 54% of grants are received by students of the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD), and that the remaining 46% is distributed among 26 private universities (MESS&T, 2017). In Peru, 90% of the budget is destined to private universities, and 5 out of 10 with the highest number of grantees are "for-profit" universities (Sunedu, 2017). In the case of Chile, among different student benefits, "gratuity"<sup>17</sup> was distributed mainly in State institutions (50,5%), scholarships mainly in professional institutions, all of them private (44,8%); and loans towards private universities (39,1%) (Memoria beneficios estudiantiles, 2016).

We can then extrapolate from this analysis that, even when information is scarce or there is not much data for the whole region or for each individual country, there are still some elements that shed light on certain tendencies towards boosting demand funding mechanisms. In a context that defines higher education as a public good and a right, systems centered on scholarship granting and student loans grow and become consolidated. This accentuates the *commodification*, as funding "follows" individual choices in a market or pseudo-market framework, and begets a form of privatization, as public funding -which, as previously indicated, increased over the last few years- mostly gets redirected, through the blurring of the public-private frontier, to the private sector.

In summation, although funding mechanisms strongly linked to offer financing are still predominant, it can be observed how demand funding logics are becoming a regional tendency, while the most privatized systems, like Chile and Brazil, are consolidated as model cases. This indicates that public budget growth prevalent at least until the end of this period, has not put a stop to distribution logics that have been at the forefront since the 90s, guided by reforms proposed by the New Public Management. In this sense, the increase in public sector funding has not been enough to neutralize the various forms taken after these tendencies by privatization and commodification processes.

<sup>17</sup> This "gratuity" policy consists of tuition payment by the State for most students in the country. This policy is a demand financing device, since it involves the population's most vulnerable 60%, who would be exempt from paying tuition and enrollment fees during their career formation and will be enrolled in higher education institutions adhered to this policy. These can be any type of HEI, as long as they have been accredited, are registered as non-profit legal entities and have their own transparent admissions system. (<https://portal.beneficiosestudiantiles.cl/gratuidad>).

## **Privatization in Latinamerican universities: power entanglements and sense misconceptions**

Over the last few decades, Higher Education in Latin America has gone through two very meaningful processes that cannot be unacknowledged when trying to understand its current configuration. On one hand, a very prominent expansion that manifests in three aspects: first, a pronounced and sustained increase of enrollment; in second place, an accelerated institution multiplication, specially from the private sector; and last, the growth and diversification of careers, levels and titles offered in the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

On the other hand, a big fraction of this expansion occurred during the period starting with the end of Latinamerican dictatorships during the 80s, in a context of neoliberal rule. Those were regressive years in terms of public university financing, which led the previously mentioned expansion through conditions that eroded institutions and forced them to seek resources in the private sector.

As we know, neoliberal hegemony implied, among other things, a widening of the market both politically and symbolically speaking. In other words, the market became central not only to the economic sphere, but also to the field of public policies, in good measure due to the impulse transnational commerce received with both Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and national and international policies keen to bolstering corporations. In this context, education in general and universities particularly

were looked at as business opportunities and defined by those FTAs as marketable goods<sup>18</sup> (Feldfeber and Saforcada, 2005). In the same vein, knowledge was read-dressed as a direct economic value and this translated into international regulations linked to commerce through chapters in FTAs (or specific agreements) established in relation to patents and intellectual property<sup>19</sup> (Saforcada, 2009).

These three issues -university growth in terms of enrollment and institutions, the de-funding of public university systems, and this context of market rule in public policy orientations and dynamics- formed the ideal scenario for a strong push from privatization and commodification processes in knowledge production and higher education. This way, these decades we have seen how the private university sector has grown increasingly faster while the public sector has become more and more susceptible to the market's interests. These issues had already been raised in La Habana, 1995, in the declaration of the first Regional Conference on Higher Education:

[...] higher education in the region shows amongst its main tendencies: (a) notable growth in student enrollment; (b) a persistence of inequalities and difficulties towards knowledge democratization; (c) relatively restricted public funding; (d) a fast multiplication and diversification of different types of tertiary level institutions; and (e) a growing participation of the private sector in academic offer.

These processes of privatization and commodification, which became greatly dynamic during the 1990s, continued to develop sustainedly into the new century, impacting the public sector not only with its explicit forms of privatization but also for other less visible modalities linked to the introduction of market logics and mechanisms into institution regulation and activities of formation, research and extension (CRESALC/UNESCO, 1996, Gentili and Saforcada, 2011; García Guadilla, 2003; Burbano López, 1999).

In this section we aim to share some final considerations related to certain aspects of privatization and commodification processes of Latin American and Caribbean universities, using as our basis the content developed in this report in relation to the characteristics, dimensions and involved actors.

## **University privatization**

As we have seen throughout this report, we can confirm that university privatization and commodification tendencies have been a constant from the middle of the 20th

<sup>18</sup> See the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization(WTO) or the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), among others.

<sup>19</sup> In the OMC's framework, the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) is key on this issue.

Century and up until today, with pronounced acceleration and depth since the 90s. What has not been constant is its scope in relation to the different political contexts. Particularly, in the 21st Century public policies in the university sector have been very heterogeneous from different governments. In some segments of this period and some countries, these privatization tendencies were up to a point contained by or co-existed with public sector strengthening and development policies (such was the case during the cycle of post-neoliberal governments). Nevertheless, they did not stop.

The privatization's span and the persistence of these processes have transformed this region, which we have characterized as hyper-privatized in the field of higher education (Saforcada, Atairo, Trotta and Rodríguez Golisano, 2019). We are hence defining it as a quantitatively harsh reality: over half higher education students attend the private sector, and two out of every three universities are private institutions. These numbers clearly demonstrate the weight this sector carries.

2003 is usually looked at as the turning point for this process, seeing as it was the moment when enrollment in private higher education institutions surpassed that of its public counterpart. Latin America and South Asia are the only two regions on the planet where the private sector is bigger than the public sector.

Nonetheless, these processes not only involve the private sector's expansion, but also have an impact in the public sphere. We talk of privatization and commodification because they imply both growth in the private sector and its progressive gravitation towards higher education systems, as well as privatization of aspects and elements of the public sector, commodification practices towards its insides and the ever blurrier limits between public and private. As Leher states, "nowadays, higher education is heavily pressured by commodification of education in general. This reality can be explained both by the vertiginous expansion of the private-commodifying sector in the region as well as -in the case of public institutions- a porous frontier between public and private that has redefined the social role of institutions and academic ethos" (2010, p.8-9).

Verger (2013) refers to the public university's commodification as a phenomenon developed from three constitutive dimensions, overlapped between themselves: privatization, liberalization and commercialization, which relate, respectively, to the participations of private parties in university politics, the introduction of market norms and logics, such as competition, to regulate the sector; and the accentuation of service purchase and sale both in a national and international context.

Following this line of thought, some studies have made an effort towards theorizing over the ways in which neoliberal policies overlap with the operation of public universities. The concept of academic capitalism was coined by Slaughter and Leslie to refer to market behaviors inside of research universities, among which they highlight

institutional competition, the pursuit of funding, the selling of services, or institutional restructuring (for example, the reduction or expansion of departments or careers) using market criteria (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Brunner et al, 2019).

## **Strategies and objectives of privatization and commodification**

As we finish our report, we are interested in highlighting a few issues brought up by both research projects, which constitute core points to analyze and debate these privatization and commodification processes in Latin American and Caribbean universities from a political perspective.

### **Public policies of privatization**

In the first place, it is important to underline that the privatization and commodification of universities involves economic and political interests. We tend to analyze and discuss these issues in terms of profit and commerce; however, even though these economical aspects are relevant, they are not alone. Privatization processes have political and ideological ends that coexist with commercial interests. In fact, we could even analyze how, in different countries or historical contexts at the regional level, privatization always answered first to political interests or converged with political and economical objectives.

As such, one key aspect relates to what we could call “public policies of privatization”, which is to say, the development of policies originating in the State or in government organisms that, directly or indirectly, on one hand benefit or strengthen the private sector, and on the other commodify the public sphere. On this note, financing policies take a central role, as we have seen previously.

Thus, a lack of public resources and suitable funding to guarantee proper functioning in public universities in most countries, is interpreted as a policy that weakens the public sphere in a context of neoliberal policies. Moreover, this is also an active and powerful privatization strategy in various aspects. On one hand, because it places universities in a role of devising resource intake mechanisms through: under- and/or post-graduate tuitions, entry course tariffing, selling diverse services, and forming public-private alliances. Which is to say, public universities are made to operate under market logic, contributing to the naturalization of a privatist rationale to comprehend the public sphere.

On the other hand, because in most countries defunding processes coming from the State have forced public universities to generate more rigorous and selective student



intake systems, given that they no longer had the infrastructure, decent numbers or necessary resources to take in a higher number of students. In a context of higher education demand expansion, access difficulties generated an exodus of growing enrollment into the private sector, benefitting the traditional private universities created halfway through the 20th Century. Moreover, this resulted in the creation of many more private institutions, some of them owned by international corporations, and a big part of them operating under the “low-cost education” model, which does not cover the minimum requirements to be identified as universities in terms of infrastructure, decent numbers, sustainability, among other issues.

In this vein, higher education financing policies have been shrinkage policies, public sector privatization policies, and private sector strengthening and profiting policies. And, above all else, the ideological abandonment of social and public good perspectives, and naturalization of privatist logic.

### **The blurring of the frontier between public and private**

Secondly, the researched information allowed us to verify not only the porosity of the public sphere towards the private sector -as we pointed out before-, but also a marked tendency towards erasing the differentiation between public and private related to higher education; a tendency that has both material and symbolic aspects. In regards to the material side, we are referring to the growing resource transference from the public sphere to the private sector, as has been analyzed in previous sections. Historically, in Latin America and the Caribbean, public resources for higher education, science and technology were destined almost exclusively to the public sector. Nonetheless, that scheme has gradually shifted towards redirecting some of those resources to private institutions, via egalitarian arguments seeking “fair treatment”. Specially during this century and even more so over the last 15 years, the necessary devices and mechanisms were created to guarantee this “fair treatment” between private and public institutions, allowing public funding to be increasingly transferred to the private sector through scholarships and credits, research project financing or other benefits linked to careers in research, among other alternatives.

This tendency towards the fading of public-private limits in higher education also has a symbolic facet, manifested in the region in the multiple ways in which certain private education modalities started to be considered as public. This was not unique to the higher education level, as definitions shifted from public and private *schools*, to schools of private or public *management*, thus incorporating -in many cases even in legislation- the idea that all education is public and the distinction only comes down to its management (Feldfeber, 2011; Saforcada, 2012). In the case of university systems, we have even seen how traditionally private universities become identified as

public or at least compared to public universities. This redefinition is both implicitly and explicitly maintained through various arguments. One of them relates to the absence of a profit-oriented mentality in some institutions, being negligent of the political aspect of private universities. Which is to say, even when there are no economic interests, private universities still respond to individual interests from certain groups, religious institutions or (generally elitist) social groups. What defines it as private is not whether it aims to make a profit or not, but rather whether it shows individual interests or not (in fact, profit would be one of the interests at hand, with political, religious, cultural and social interests among other possibilities).

Likewise, research has let us verify that in countries where a private institution explosion occurred during the 90s or later, new logics that correlate traditional private universities (generally created between the 50s and the 70s) with public universities so as to differentiate them from new private institutions, generally bigger and low-cost. Traditional universities visualize themselves as resembling public institutions, using the argument that their interests are fundamentally public or defining themselves as “quality universities”, trying to set themselves apart from these new universities conceived as “low quality”.

The erasure of this separation between public and some if not all private universities is related to them being considered collectively as one group by university regulation groups and the establishing of egalitarian treatment—as we pointed out before in relation to funding—in diverse system devices, such as student grants, research career systems, project calls, or evaluation and accreditation processes. This assimilation of public and private institutions is presented as “fair treatment” rooted in a supposed exercise of justice, which proves effective in invisibilizing the political processes that aim to assimilate private and public, as well as naturalize individual interests that lean towards the private sector.

Another issue related to the above is what we have called the “trivialization of university autonomy” (Saforcada, Atairo, Trotta and Rodríguez Golisano, 2019), which is to say, the appropriation of the concept of autonomy by private universities in order to compare themselves to public universities, demanding deregulation by the State. This search towards State noninterference in some cases has to do with the objective of self-determination of the formation they provide; in others, it is related to needing a lack of controls to secure their permanence, given the precariousness of their establishments and their unfulfillment of bare minimal requirements. As such, the concept of autonomy is redefined by leaving the political aspect out of it, and instead reformulating it under liberal logic.

## **Influences, lobbying and privatizing action**

Lastly, it is relevant to analyze the private university sector's gravitation in government and State. Through our research, we have reconstructed how private universities have increased their capacity to directly impact public policies, either through strong relations with certain government sectors such as Congress or ministries, or through incorporating accreditation and university evaluation agencies.

This gravitation and its influence manifest strongly in university policies but does not limit itself to that field. In many of the region's countries, private university owners, authorities or managing institutions have the power to intervene in governments and public policies in general. The sources of this power vary. In regards to massive private universities, this power stems from the volume of resources they handle and the amount of students they enroll. This allows them to develop their influence and bargaining capacities by financing political campaigns, leveraging candidates of their own, pressing governments over their ability to affect thousands of citizens studying in them, among other methods.

On the other hand, traditional private universities have great lobbying capacity because of their relation to elite groups, Church and the most powerful business groups; but also by forming those that later occupy high responsibility positions within the government, generating communication channels between the political system and these universities, which act more or less explicitly depending on the political context .

Also, it is important to highlight the diversity of actors intervening in these university privatization and commodification processes, setting up complex and, at times, dark frameworks, using strategies that are at times evident but can sometimes operate undercover. International organizations, in particular The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), have carried out decisive actions in many countries in the region, not only through the policies they explicitly promote, but also by funding particular groups that found private universities, as has been evidenced in some nations.

Likewise, the pandemic came to be a scenario in which links have been brought to light between certain governments, international groups and big corporations in the university sphere.

Thus, the variety of implicated actors, organization and institutions, the unfolding power relations and the resulting plots form an entanglement in which, usually, intentions are not always clear and privatist interests guiding them end up benefitted. In fact, there have often been initiatives that, under the guise of seemingly advocating for the right to higher education, actually introduce issues that appeal to requirements

or demands from the private sector, either through resource transference, institution legitimacy, “fair treatment”, among others. Grant and credit allocation methods to access higher education in some countries are a great example of this.

## **Some conclusions and many questions: challenges in facing privatization**

As has been displayed through these pages, Latin America and its university systems are the location for a substantive dispute about what education, knowledge and universities should be, in other words a dispute about what society we should strive for. Processes, actions and actors are varied and heterogeneous, but there are a few elements and strategies that are common to most countries in the region.

The combination of privatization and commodification processes -which is to say, private sector expansion and market-orientation in the public sphere- results in an important issue that requires immediate action, even more so after the pandemic and the current context of political polarization and far-right sectors’ growth.

The methods through which these privatization processes are being carried out have become less and less evident as the limit between private and public turns blurrier and, and at the same time, as the private sector claims and redefines historic elements of public university, such as autonomy and its role in higher education democratization, redefining concepts of privatist and individualist logic.

This results in huge challenges. At stake are not only university systems themselves, but also the role universities play in social construction and hegemonic or anti-hegemonic configurations, as well as their capacity to impact public politics.

All these issues are conditioned essentially by a dispute over senses of education, knowledge and culture; as well as forms of knowledge and culture creation, recreation and transmission. They are disputes about whether education is a right or a service, and related to knowledge being a common good or a commodity.

Because of these strains, public universities have plenty of work ahead of them, as long as universities that identify themselves as public **actually are** public. Which is to say, that its condition of being “public” is necessary, for example in regards to legal frameworks, but is not enough in regards to what has been explained about permeability to the market, being vulnerable to market interests and the introduction of market logic into public universities.

It is necessary to question some of the cores we have seen throughout this text that limit the strengthening and development of the public sphere, such as resource dis-

tribution forms and criteria; prohibition of “for-profit” institutions in all its shapes; a clear distinction between public and private; the identification and debate of issues of commodification logic in knowledge regulation and production; among others.

Hence, it is fundamental to recover what we opened this report with, agreed upon collectively in the 2008 Regional Conference on Higher Education in Cartagena and ratified in the 2018 RCHE in Córdoba, 100 years after the University Reform took place in that city and traveled across Latin America: *Higher Education is a common public good, a universal human right which should be ensured by all States.*

Public sphere radicalization becomes essential for building fairer and more egalitarian societies. As is known, Latin America and the Caribbean is the unfairest and most unequal region worldwide, and have the most privatized higher education. Those of us who value public universities and are convinced that higher education is a right and knowledge a public good; have an essential battle ahead.

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