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Democratisation or credentialism? Public policies of expansion of higher education in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, many Latin American governments have implemented policies to expand opportunities in higher education, aiming at reducing discrimination and social inequalities. These policies have taken different forms, according to the peculiarities of the respective higher education systems. The purpose of this paper is to explore the scope and limitations of these policies. We develop our analysis of theoretical literature on the subject, and review empirical information available from secondary sources of recent experience in five countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela. Argentina has increased opportunities for disadvantaged social sectors by expanding the public sector. Brazil has attempted to improve access for ethnic and social minorities in both public and private institutions. Chile is a unique case because of the continuing commitment to allow market forces to shape higher education. In Mexico, increased opportunities for access have resulted from the creation of intercultural universities and technical institutions in the public sector, as well as through growth in the private sector. Finally, in Venezuela, expansion occurred through the creation of a new system of universities that operates in parallel to traditional public institutions. We note that, in all cases, the policies reflect an underlying belief that there are only benefits to unlimited expansion, without regard to possible consequences, such as an excess of university graduates in economies with limited job opportunities for them. Moreover, these policies do not take into consideration the deficit of cultural and educational capital of young people who come from the most marginalised social sectors, deficits that may hinder their success. Concepts such as 'overeducation' or 'credencialism' call into question that optimistic belief and explain the limitations of the coverage expansion in terms of real democratisation.

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1. Introduction

Policies for expanding opportunities to access higher education have become a growing priority on government agendas throughout Latin America. Regardless of the diverse modalities and peculiarities of each higher education systems or the cultural traditions

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and values that define each nation, the emphasis on reducing social discrimination and inequalities that operate at this educational level is common to all of the countries in this study.

The purpose of this study is to explore the scope and limitations of policies intended to resolve inequities in the light of existing theoretical literature on the subject, and to consider in detail the recent experiences in five countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela. These national cases were chosen due to their heuristic value, and because their differences account for a range of strategies being employed in the region. The policy analysis deployed in each national case follows the development of expansion strategy, considering empirical information available from secondary sources.

In each and every case, policies are based on the conviction that educational expansion *per se* provides unlimited benefit, without taking into account the complexity of the massification process or the undesired consequences that may result from the devaluation of credentials and the lack of a concurrent expansion of opportunities in the labour market, a phenomenon especially detrimental to the more disadvantaged social sectors. Additionally, these policies are often implemented without regard to the deficits of both academic and cultural capital of the young people that policies are designed to help. Moreover, institutional differentiation along with diplomas of diverse value is not acknowledged. Therefore, we question the accomplishments in these five cases in terms of system expansion to increase social representation in higher education, recognising the nuances of the national diversity and the unique challenges that each country must confront.

The work is divided into four parts; the Section 2offers a theoretical framework including the main variables that affect the achievement of democratisation in higher education. In Section 3, we consider case studies from Latin America. In Sections 4 and 5, we offer an in-depth analysis of policies implemented in recent years to increase educational opportunities and consider their impact on social and labour market terms.

2. Regarding the massification of higher studies and its effects: a theoretical approach

Expansion of opportunities in higher education is based on a studied myth: that there is a linear correlation between educational expansion and social mobility or in the reduction of social inequality. It should be noted that due to the high levels of inequality in Latin America (considered the most unequal region of the planet) this is not a minor issue; nevertheless, an analysis requires a complex methodology to allow the identification of the different dimensions of this complex problem.

Tenti (2007) notes that, in contemporary societies, potential for democratisation is closely associated with the extent to which knowledge is accessible to all or accessible to a limited elite. In capitalist societies, knowledge capital tends to be unequally distributed similar to land ownership and other tangible economic benefits. In this sense, the author points out that 'it is demagogy to state that knowledge may be given to everybody, because knowledge is not unilaterally distributed: it requires its coproduction with a subject who, in order to learn, requires certain conditions which he/she often lacks' (San Martín 2014, 3).

These considerations may throw some light on what seems to be a paradox in deeply unequal societies such as those of Latin America: the demand for wider opportunities in higher education seems to find more receptivity in official spheres than demands for a

more equitable distribution of income or land. It is apparently considered a more attainable goal towards the promise of a more equal society.

Nevertheless, equitable access to educational establishments offers no guarantee of success in the transit through to completion. For Bourdieu and Passeron (2006), the affinity between the cultural habits of a social class and the academic expectations of the academic system determine the possibilities for success. Even approximating comparable economic circumstances (through scholarships and/or credits) to pursue higher studies does not ameliorate the advantages/disadvantages that matter in a university system that rewards, supposedly without bias, individual merit. Thus, the creation of a formal equality of possibilities would lead to a legitimation of privileges by the educational system.

Renaut (2008) acknowledges that even if trying to attempt equity of results is quite unrealistic, introducing changes in academic and organisational conditions in order to increase the possibilities of success of student is a significant advancement. On the other hand, the expanded opportunities for the participation of historically under-represented groups without taking into account their needs and their real cognitive capacity have resulted in increased rates of drop-off and repetition, and as a consequence, limitations in employment, remuneration and productivity (Aponte-Hernández 2008, 20).

From this perspective, we should consider Rawls' general rule (1971), which states that, when formulating public policy, the objective must be to improve the welfare of those in *the worst* social conditions. In other words, he proposes to maximize the minimum utility instead of maximizing the sum of the total utility of society. This *maximin* criterion implies that the State must focus on improving the welfare of those most disadvantaged, even though, in itself, this does not guarantee the construction of a totally egalitarian society. However, Rosanvallon (1995) points out that *equality of opportunity* must aim at achieving sustained equity over time and not only at the starting point. Thus, progress must be made towards *equality of results* that requires addressing the way opportunity is experienced by individual in different circumstances. In this sense, equality of opportunity implies not only the intervention and compensation, at a starting point, but also rather an ongoing effort.

These discussions are not new. From the field of education sociology, many voices have debated the concrete potentialities of (higher) education as a means to transform social realities. The meritocratic perspectives (Parsons 1970), for instance, emphasised the favourable incidence of economic and social development on the reduction of the incidence of social origin on educational and occupational trajectories and results. From this perspective, educational expansion would lead to an equalisation of opportunities, which would in turn correlate with improvements in abilities, effort and individual achievements.[1] Empirical results, though, failed to corroborate this position.

More critical perspectives call attention to the perverse effects that could result from a naive expansion of the education that did not acknowledge the educational system's own limitations and those of the labour market. Notwithstanding particular differences, diverse viewpoints[2] reflect a set of common elements. Authors state that when the number of diplomas awarded increases faster than opportunities within a labour market, the result is credential inflation, 'overeducation' (Van Damme 2014) or 'credentialism' (Collins 1979; Dore 1980). In other words, when the velocity of socioeconomic expansion lags behind the velocity of diploma expansion, the latter loses value.[3] This would be, according

to Bourdieu (1991), a desired effect of privileged groups that, through school degrees and the institutions that grant them, generates a space of competition between classes.[4]

There are multiple victims resulting from uncontrolled expansion. First, are those who have no degree and therefore lack what quickly becomes the minimum qualification to compete in the labour market. Next are those who, even when they earn a degree, lack the social resources to make use of it. The third group is that of the privileged individuals, who tend to abandon less-valued areas of study in favour of those with greater value and prestige (Bourdieu 1991), especially when earned in elite institutions. Under these conditions, therefore, the expansion of opportunities in higher education does not contribute to the reduction of social inequalities: on the contrary, it often sustains them, providing only the illusion of equal opportunities for all.

From this viewpoint, Raftery and Hout (1993) claim that, even with increased opportunities resulted from expansion and even if *all* individuals take advantage of great access regardless of their social standing, privileged sectors continue to receive greater benefits. Disadvantaged groups gain access to an educational level only when the more privileged groups have already reached the saturation point. Thus, despite many reforms in higher education a cumulative social inequality persists.

In this same vein, Passeron, Dubet and Duru-Bellat detail the negative effects of education inflation that, according to these authors, has taken place during the last few decades. The multiplication of diplomas, or credentialism, has generated a systematic displacement of the relation of a degree to its social power, and develops neither with the same speed nor in the same sense as the evolution of the work structure (Passeron 1979). Thus, as levels of schooling raise and as larger cohorts of students proceed to higher levels of achievement, there may be an inverse effect to what was desired, constituting both a bad investment for the country and a deepening of inequalities (Duru-Bellat 2006). In personal terms, according to the author, more training brings rewards to individuals, but exceptions to this assumption are increasing. For society as a whole, this process becomes a squandering of resources because available positions are limited and because diploma inflation leads (as does all inflation) to their devaluation.

The thesis of diploma inflation/devaluation has received different reactions yet do not negate that these processes are occurring, but rather attempt to understand why there is no corresponding reduction of demand. Poullaouec (2006) points out that diplomas would represent 'the weapon of the weak'; even acknowledging the decrease of their exchange value and the fact that while they are increasingly insufficient to secure a job, they become increasingly necessary. Moreover, holding a diploma attenuates certain inequalities and discriminations of the more disadvantaged individuals in the labour market.

In this same sense, Brown (2003) notes that, as educational opportunities increase, it becomes more difficult to achieve levels of remuneration accorded to degree holders in the past because current capitalist development permanently seeks to reduce labour costs. Individuals then fall in an 'opportunity trap', which propels them to increase educational achievements even with limited potential rate of return. It is certainly a trap because it is evident that, if everybody adopts the same tactic, no one will have an advantage; nevertheless, it is essential to keep 'playing' the game in order to have some chance of winning.[5] In this scenario, it is middle- and upper-class families who receive the greatest benefits from their degrees.

From a different analytical perspective, Van Damme, a member of the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, studies the undesirable effects generated by high levels of qualification with the professionally active population. He notes the existence of diverse positions, for and against the continued expansion of the tertiary level. Among the latter, he stresses the risk of *overschooling*,[6] which he links to the misalignment that results when highly qualified workers appropriate job positions that previously pertained to individuals with lesser qualifications.[7]

In this sense, using the empirical evidence provided in *Education at a Glance* (2014), the author suggests that there might be a correlation between the increased number of highly educated adults in the workforce and reduced trajectories to high salaries for young people with tertiary-level degrees entering the labour market. This correspondence is not yet conclusive, as different schemes operate in different countries: to produce only the quantity of skills that the market requires at a given time; to force innovation and productivity through an excessive offer of skills; to eschew demand for expansion because their systems meet the demand.

This debate in the developed countries has had a wide impact in Latin America, where the ambivalence about the role of higher education in promoting social mobility, on the one hand, and as a social barrier that justifies differences and legitimises discrimination, on the other is recognised (Alcántara Santuario and Villa Lever 2014). Meanwhile, from a viewpoint of expanding coverage, the debate has gradually advanced to focus on the pursuit of equal treatment and results in educational institutions, as part of a second-generation's democratic requirement (García Huidobro 2007).

Other peculiarities of Latin America include increased institutional differentiation and greater segmentation where the expansion of the higher education has preserved asymmetries and the subsequent preservation of social inequalities (Rama 2009; Brunner 2011; Alcántara Santuario and Villa Lever 2014); as well as conserving the dominance of social alliances, family relationships and political influence (Tunnermann Bernheim 1979).

The range of positions presented demonstrate the complexity of consequences resulting from widening opportunities at the higher levels of education, and the dependent character of the schooling variable as regards the social and economic spheres and the functioning of the labour market. In this regard, the social origin of those now demanding access to higher education has a strong influence on their potential academic achievement and later insertion into the labour market once the diploma has been obtained. Moreover, Duru-Bellat (2015) states that, whatever advantages this expansion may bring, it is limited, as the education system does not determine the market value of the academic degrees it awards; this value is determined within the labour market.

Within the context it may be hypothesised that schooling expansion at the higher level should protect against unemployment and ultimately against poverty, but only a certain kind of *élite* institutions would guarantee occupational insertion in high status, professional positions that would also ensure higher salary levels. A 'new order' would thus be established that would preserve traditional social distances, and the amplification of educational opportunity would not produce a reduction of inequalities but rather preserve them, albeit through a different procedure.

3. Higher education in Latin America

In Latin America, recent decades have brought a steady expansion of educational coverage at all levels; in this regard, programmes such as Education for All (UNESCO) and the Millennium Development Goals (UN) have had a favourable effect on the increase in primary and secondary education, and the consequent pressure on higher education. However, these improvements in coverage and graduation have nonlinear effects in terms of reducing inequality and poverty and increasing economic growth (Filgueira et al. 2006).

Some authors recognise the impact of the social structure of the region on the possibilities for the educational sphere to alleviate poverty, and they recognise the limitations of the effects of educational achievements in economic and social circuits (Filgueira et al. 2006). Others instead have focused on the limitations of educational policy when it is not linked to other (labour, health or local development) policies that facilitate better living conditions and opportunities for social inclusion.

In this regard, they often assume that investment in higher education will expand the skills that will be sought by the future labour market; however, they seldom contemplate the absorption capacity of the market or the salaries needed to guarantee social inclusion (Bonal, Tarabini-Castellani, and Klickowski del SAPS 2007). Moreover, the devaluation of educational credentials in the region since the middle of last century has been deepened by globalisation. In this context and beyond the beneficial effects that the expansion of participation at all educational levels always produces, a paradox arises: it is possible for a population to be 'over-educated' without a corresponding number of opportunities for insertion into the professional labour market (Bonal, Tarabini-Castellani, and Klickowski del SAPS 2007).

The traditional configuration of Latin American university systems developed during the twentieth century featured strong state participation but with high levels of institutional autonomy; the model experienced significant modifications during the 1990s as a result of relevant reforms introduced in many cases by multilateral credit organisms.

One of the core ideas of those reforms was institutional differentiation, which resulted in the emergence of a great variety of establishments (public or private, technological and technical) with varying levels of quality. New procedures for oversight and regulation were put in place in almost every country in the region, through accreditation and quality assurance systems (Rama 2006; Fernández Lamarra 2007). These neoliberal reforms were aimed at the efficient application of resources along with public expenditure curtailment, and sustained a notion of equity that focused on the poorest sectors, justifying economic relief to the primary and middle-school levels and the introduction (or increase) of fees at the higher level, in a region where, traditionally, higher education was mostly cost-free.

These tendencies notably contrasted the agenda held by several of the Latin America governments at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The emergence of populist or more social democratic governments returned the state to its position of primary responsibility for education, producing a sustained expansion of the coverage of social underprivileged groups to democratise the third-level process.

As a result of the massification introduced by mid-twentieth century and the different policies implemented during the last two decades, Latin America experienced a strong expansion in the coverage of higher education. During the last 40 years, access to this

level has increased fivefold (Henríquez Guajardo 2015); nevertheless, this growth appears within a context in which the Gross Tertiary Education Enrolment Ratio barely reaches 40% of the population between the ages of 20 and 24, and there persists within most educational institutions an underrepresentation of the more disadvantaged socioeconomic sectors and of other ethnic-racial groups, people with disabilities and so on. This situation was evident in countries that surpass 60% of coverage (Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay) as well as in those that have still not attained 30% (Brazil and Mexico).

However, growth has varied by socioeconomic sector, and this is reflected in the composition of total enrolment, where regional average indicates that 50% of the offspring of the wealthiest quintile undertakes higher studies, versus less than 20% of the offspring of the poorest quintile (Aponte-Hernández 2008). This is even more significant in the case of graduates distributed by socioeconomic income: while the completion of higher studies in the 25–29-year-old cohort reaches 0.7% of the poorest quintile, for the wealthiest quintile it is 18.3% (UNESCO 2013, 9).[8]

This is the general context in which our five cases under study are inserted: although they do not exhaust the variations that exist in the region, they are a sample of this diversity. These cases illuminate the general trend of expanding opportunities of higher education, and particular situations unique to each of the countries studied and their respective higher education systems. Argentina illustrates the growth of opportunities for disadvantaged social sectors through the expansion of the public sector; Brazil seeks the inclusion of ethnic and social minorities in public and private institutions; in Chile, the process has special features given the contrast of these policies with the context of quasi-market principles operating in higher education; in Mexico, the expansion occurs mainly through the creation of technical institutions and intercultural universities in the public sector and the growth of the private sector; and in Venezuela, the expansion is manifested through the creation of a parallel system of public institutions. The choice of the five cases is also justified by the fact that enrolment in these five countries makes up around 70% of total enrolment in the region.

Argentina has a higher education system that is predominantly public encompassing around 71% of total enrolment; access to universities is open to all secondary-school graduates and there is an enduring tradition of not charging tuition or fees. On the other hand, Brazil's system is predominantly private accounting for 75% of total enrolment and 90% of institutions, with highly competitive access to elite public institutions that do not charge any fees. In view of the fact that approximately 45% of the population may be considered of African descent and represented a much smaller percentage in enrolment data, discrimination and inequality due to colour and ethnicity[9] are a major concern.

In Chile, the military government introduced legislative changes in 1980 that, with few modifications, have continued until the present day and reflect a competitive market model. Brunner (2008) claims that this system shows two basic features that distinguish it within the global spectrum: a very high proportion of enrolment in the private subsystem, and a high share of total expenditure in higher education originating from private sources. Moreover, both public and private institutions charge tuition fees, and admission to the best universities is highly competitive. Only during the last year has there been a change in the government's position regarding the possibility of further opening the highest level of the university hierarchy to a broader base of society with new initiatives aimed at the eliminating fees for some students at these elite institutions.

Since 1998 election of Chávez to the presidency in Venezuela, tertiary education assumed a more prominent place on the government's agenda. The objective was to construct a new educational model with 'Socialist Bolivarian' features, in order to train professionals according to the country's needs and those of the current new political model. In this context, priority was given to the revision of selective access to higher education that was used in the past, and a strong institutional expansion of the free public sector.

Similar to Argentina, Mexico has an important tradition of free public education, which started changing during the 1990s due to the expansion of private offers. This was accompanied by an institutional diversification of diverse quality and with selective admission to the most prestigious public institutions.

Table 1 shows some general data that allow framing the cases under study and their singularities.

4. Expansion strategies

Policies expanding opportunities in higher education that have been developed in the region have generated a sustained growth at this educational level in the five cases studied. Among the strategies for the expanding access, three main mechanisms may be identified: institutional expansion, direct economic support through scholarships and affirmative action policies.

4.1. Institutional expansion

Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela have widened and diversified institutional coverage during the last decade and mechanisms were put in place to cover the requirements of economically challenged populations. In some cases, institutional expansion occurred through the creation of new public institutions (Argentina, Venezuela and Brazil), while in Mexico the expansion was in both the public and private sectors.[10] These changes have not always proved to be real transformations or achieved the desired impact especially in terms of social demand.

Table 1. Population, students per one thousand inhabitants, schooling rates and enrolment by management sector in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela (last available year).

	Population	Students per one thousand inhabitants	Total enrolment	Enrolment in public higher education institutions (%)	Enrolment in private higher education institutions (%)
Argentina (2014)	40,760,000	66	2,725,300	71	29
Brazil (2014)	196,700,000	40	7,830,000	25	75
Chile (2015)	16,600,000	70	1,152,125	20	80
Mexico (2014)	120,800,000	28	3,420,000	69	31
Venezuela (2010)	29,280,000	66	1,951,686	70	30

Sources: Population data come from the respective Statistical Institutes and those for universities from the Ministries: Argentina, *Anuario de Estadísticas Universitarias*, 2014; Venezuela, *MPPES, 10 años de logros*; Brazil, *Censo de Educação Superior 2014;* Chile, *Servicio de Información de Educación Superior 2014* and Mexico, *Sistema Educativo de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 2013-2014*.

In every case, priority has been given to establishing institutions in interior regions or cities that lacked tertiary institutions in order to address the needs of historically neglected populations. Moreover, some countries have created indigenous or intercultural universities institutions to expand opportunities for ethnic minorities.

The case of *Chile* presents special features. In 1980, there were eight universities; since then, the system has diversified through various means: the creation of private universities, the granting of autonomy to some faculties of traditional universities and expansion of access in regions outside the capitol by granting degree-granting authority to autonomous private universities. Since 1995, however, there has been a reduction in the number of institutions, as some private institutions were closed due to the quality deficits demonstrated during the accreditation processes, and other closed voluntarily when they did not reach adequate enrolment levels (Zapata, Tejeda and Rojas, 2011). Enrolment in the private sector has nonetheless continued to expand, currently reaching 80%.

In *Argentina* from 1990 to the present, a new higher education map has been created as a result of the creation of 28 new public universities and 29 new private universities. In the public sector, 14 were established in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, 6 during the 1990s and 8 in the first decade of this century.[11] They are institutions serving disadvantaged socioeconomic districts and offering higher education to a student population with scarce economic and cultural resources, who are frequent, the first generation of university students in their families. This institutional expansion has been articulated, in the last decade, with other measures aimed at the secondary-school level, such as initiatives to reward the completion of studies.

In the case of *Brazil*, during the government of José 'Lula' Da Silva public coverage increased through the creation of 14 new federal universities spread across 140 campuses. In 2014, the Roussef administration authorised the creation of 4 additional federal universities, 120 new technical schools and added 47 university campuses. Two of the new universities will be established in the state of Bahía (in the centre-north of the country), one in Ceará (northeast) and another in Pará (north), all previously neglected regions. The objective has been to expand higher education opportunities in disadvantaged socioeconomic areas to improve access to previously under-represented social groups.

In *Mexico* a significant public expansion has been implemented, aimed at generating opportunities in those regions where young people had limited access to tertiary education. Since 1991 a number of *technological universities* (public establishments to cater for lower income sectors) have been created, as well as *intercultural universities*[12] in zones with a high proportion of indigenous population. This expansion of the public offer has been accompanied by a strong expansion of private offer with continuing growth in coverage by this sector.

In *Venezuela*, the confrontation between the Chávez administration and traditional universities led to an institutional expansion of a different nature. The country developed an aggressive policy to widen educational offer through the creation of new establishments and the 'municipalisation'[13] of higher education. These policies have nonetheless given rise to concern regarding the quality of the educational service provided by these new institutions.[14]

Thus, in all five national cases a common tendency towards expansion may be observed; it presents, however, different strategies that may be classified in four major expansion models.

(1) Coverage expansion without institutional expansion (Chile)
(2) Coverage expansion with institutional expansion in the public sector (Argentina and Brazil)
(3) Coverage expansion with institutional expansion of the public sector and system reconfiguration (Venezuela)
(4) Coverage expansion with institutional expansion of the public and private sectors (Mexico)

The expansion of higher education systems in these different ways has produced an increase in educational opportunities that benefited disadvantaged social sectors. We believe that while there have generated greater access to institutions, this process of equalisation of opportunities for the pursuit of higher studies has not considered how a number of social variables affect retention and graduation.

4.2. Direct economic support

Together with institutional expansion, the countries in this study have developed policies to provide economic support to disadvantaged students and, in some cases, affirmative action policies. Scholarships aiming at supporting students with economic difficulties can cover general expenses derived from studying in free public universities (Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela), to cover the fees of public and private establishments (Chile), or those of private establishments (Brazil).

In the case of Argentina, since the 1990s the *Programa Nacional de Becas Universitarias* (*PNBU*) [*National Programme of University Scholarships*] is designed for students at public universities who live in poverty. By the end of 2008, the *Programa Nacional de Becas Bicentenario* [*Bicentennial Scholarships National Programme*] and the *Programa Nacional de Becas de Grado TICs [ICT Graduate Scholarships National Programme*] had also been created: the first is oriented to the economic support of disadvantaged students pursuing scientific-technical degrees in public establishments, and the second to students of information and communication technologies. Priority is given to the most vulnerable socioeconomic groups; subsequently, scholarships are awarded according to academic merit. Finally, the *Programa de Respaldo a Estudiantes Argentinos* (*PROG.R.ES.AR*) [*Support Programme for Argentine Students*] was created in 2014 to provide benefits to young adults (18 to 24 years old) who are unemployed or who earn less than minimum wages, who wish to study at any educational level, including the higher education.

In Venezuela, 'the Bolivarian Revolution' increased the number of university scholarships by more than 600%. Scholarships are awarded by diverse institutions such as Fundación Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho (Fundayacucho),[15] Fundación Misión Sucre, Oficina de Planificación del Sector Universitario (OPSU), Convenio Cuba-Venezuela and Instituciones de Educación Superior (MPPEU 2010, 14). The programmes favour populations with limited resources and aims to alleviate the asymmetries between the national capital region and more remote regions.

In Mexico, the *Programa Nacional de Becas y Financiamiento para la Educación Superior* (*PRONABES*) [*National Programme of Scholarships and Financing for Higher Education*] has been in place since 2001 and targets low-income students enrolled in public establishments. The scholarship initiative includes preferential programmes for indigenous

students. During 2010–2011, 18% of the undergraduate population enrolled in public establishments received scholarship assistance.

The *Programa Universidade para Todos* (*PROUNI*) [*University for All Programme*] in Brazil was established in 2004, to provide a subsidy to private universities to reserve space for 'poor' students (those whose family income is below three minimum wages) who have completed their secondary education in public schools. The objective is to include indigenous and black students in similar proportion to their representation in each state, and to encourage teachers of basic schooling without a higher education teaching diploma to pursue a degree. Private (profit or non-profit) establishments that participate are exempt from income tax liability and social security contributions on liquid earnings. Selection of candidates is made by taking into account the results of the Esame Nacional do Ensino Medio (ENEM) (secondary schooling final examination). Loans are also available for study in the private sector through the *Programa de Financiamiento Estudiantil* (*FIES*) [*Students' Loan Programme*].

In Chile, legislative changes were introduced in 1980 that, with few modifications, continue in effect to the present day and support a 'market model' of higher education. The greatest proportion of public resources is distributed through scholarships and loans; public investment in higher education represents a minimum part of total expenditure in the sector (*circa* 15%); primary investment in the system is made through payment of fees paid by students and their families. Legislative reform has been put in place recently to guarantee free tuition for young people from the most vulnerable social sectors (i.e. to the first five socioeconomic deciles).

4.3. Affirmative action policies

Throughout the region, affirmative action policies have been created to address discrimination due to race and ethnicity, gender, place of birth and so on. In 2002, *Brazil* launched affirmative action policies in some state universities and in 2012 passed a law to reserve half the vacancies in federal universities for pupils from public schools, distributing openings among black, mulatto and indigenous students according to their proportion in each state's population.

In *Chile*, starting in 1990, the democratic governments introduced a number of affirmative action policies, the *Beca Indígena* [*Indigenous Scholarship*]; institutions also implemented special programmes to incorporate disabled and increase the representation of indigenous students and women. In 2000, *Argentina* founded the *PNBU* [*University Scholarships National Programme*] with special scholarships available to indigenous and disabled students; in case of the latter, the *Programa Política de Discapacidad para Estudiantes Universitarios* (*PODES*) [*Disability Policy for University Students Programme*] implemented initiatives to improve accessibility. National universities also created their own special programmes for indigenous students.

Venezuela has also developed programmes for disabled, indigenous and incarcerated populations. Public universities reserve 1% of total vacancies for students with disabilities, with technological support centres and other units within the different institutions.

In Mexico, the indigenous population incorporates more than 13 million people in a total population of 105 million. With financing from the Ford Foundation in 2001 and additional funds from the World Bank in 2009, the Asociación Nacional de Universidades

y Escuelas de Educación Superior (ANUIES) and the Secretaría de Educación Pública set up the *Programa de Apoyo a Estudiantes Indígenas en Instituciones de Educación Superior* (*PAEIIES*) [*Support Programme for Indigenous Students in Higher Education*] to strengthen academic resources in order to increase and improve the admission, persistence, academic performance and graduation of indigenous students in tertiary education.

In some countries, *special courses* have been created in traditional institutions targeting certain groups and oriented to the training of teachers and lecturers, such as the *Programa de Apoio à Formação Superior e Licenciaturas Interculturais Indígenas* (*PROLIND*) [*Support Programme for Indigenous Higher Education and Intercultural Degrees*] in *Brazil*, whose objective is to provide higher education to teachers who will subsequently teach indigenous students.

Many of these experiences were implemented recently, and as a result, there are still no rigorous empirical studies with assessment of their results and impact. Nevertheless, Tables 2–4 enable us to analyse some available information on the social effects of these policies.

This table shows the evolution of the higher schooling rate over more than two decades, as a distribution among the different socioeconomic income quintiles. Coverage progress in the first two quintiles is significant, signalling an improvement in the representation of the more disadvantaged social groups. The situation remains critical for Brazil.

Statistical information on educational achievement is also scarce and fragmented and we therefore approached it through the number years of schooling per capita in each income quintile and the classification of the population over 25 that completed higher studies. In this sense, the distance between the number of schooling years of the first quintiles and the last ones is significant, especially in the cases of Brazil and Mexico (Table 3).

Moreover, there is still an overrepresentation of the more privileged sectors and a limited presence of the more disadvantaged groups in the total number of university graduates. Again, this is particularly evident in Brazil and Mexico (Table 4).

Tables 2–4 allow confirm that the policies described above have achieved favourable results in social terms, as regards access to higher education. As to educational achievement levels, uneven attainment by income quintile is still evident.

5. The value of degrees

In this region, few studies have considered the distribution, by social groups, resulting from expanded higher education opportunities or scholarships; likewise, empirical information on the relation between higher education and the labour market, and on the value of degrees in the labour market, remains limited. As mentioned previously, these elements would allow for a more accurate assessment of the social impact of higher education expansion policies in terms of the real narrowing of social inequalities.

Rama (2013, 2015a, 2015b) argues that, in the region, the high return rates of professional work and the lower unemployment traditionally experienced by university graduates together with the expansion of secondary participation have led to greater social demand for access to higher education. Nevertheless, the increased number of graduates during the last few decades have been absorbed as economies modernised and expanded. This economic expansion is associated with technological change and to the expansion of primary exports with higher added value, due to high international

Table 2. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela Net enrolment rate (18–23-year-old cohort) by per capita income quintiles.

Quintiles	Argentina			Brazil			Chile			Mexico			Venezuela		
	1990	2003	2013	1992	2004	2013	1992	2003	2013	1992	2002	2012	1989	1999	2006
1st	7.7	14.4	19.1	0.6	1.0	5.0	5.3	8.4	27.4	3.3	6.9	17.8	8.7	9.0	16.9
2nd	13.6	17.8	24.3	0.7	2.1	7.8	8.6	12.7	31.6	5.8	9.9	15.0	5.3	9.2	18.6
3rd	5.5	27.9	29.6	2.0	4.7	14.2	10.6	19.6	35.8	7.9	13.6	14.5	6.3	12.2	21.6
4th	21.5	39.3	35.7	4.6	13.0	23.6	16.0	31.5	43.1	12.2	19.0	26.7	9.2	17.5	33.4
5th	41.1	57.9	54.1	19.6	44.0	48.1	29.5	58.0	62.7	29.0	46.4	44.7	21.2	42.5	52.8

Source: Elaborated as per the *Bases de datos socioeconómicos para América Latina y el Caribe* (*SEDLAC*), Universidad Nacional de La Plata and World Bank.

Table 3. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela Schooling years by family per capita income quintiles (last available year).

	Argentina		Brazil		Chile		Mexico		Venezuela	
Quintiles	2003	2013	2004	2013	2003	2013	2002	2012	2000	2006
1st	8.5	9.3	3.9	5.5	7.9	9.1	3.9	6.0	6.0	6.8
2nd	9.1	9.7	4.7	6.6	8.7	9.8	5.7	7.0	6.7	7.3
3rd	10.0	10.6	5.6	7.4	9.6	10.4	6.8	7.9	7.4	8.1
4th	11.3	11.7	7.2	8.7	10.9	11.4	8.3	9.2	8.4	9.3
5th	13.8	13.8	10.7	11.8	13.6	14.0	11.9	12.4	10.8	11.6
Average	10.8	11.3	6.8	8.3	10.3	11.2	7.7	8.9	8.1	8.9

Source: Elaborated as per the *Bases de datos socioeconómicos para América Latina y el Caribe* (*SEDLAC*), Universidad Nacional de La Plata and World Bank.

Table 4. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela Percentage of population over 25 with completed higher education by income level (last available year).

	Income level		
	Lower 30%	Middle 30%	Upper 40%
Argentina (2014)	6.35	15.32	35.31
Brazil (2011)	1.50	4.05	23.26
Chile (2013)	2.02	3.35	21.31
Mexico (2012)	1.47	3.78	18.62
Venezuela (2011)	4.79	11.12	27.56

Source: SITEAL on data from ILPE-UNESCO (http://www.siteal.iipe-oei.org/base_de_datos/consulta?indicador=&countries=20&years=2009&filters=nivel_ingresos#).

commodity prices. Thus, there is a continuous increase in the proportion of professionals within the economically active population, which oscillates between 8% and 19%.

This growth in the number of graduates has been accompanied by substantial changes in the professional market; so, even in the scenario of recent expansion, unemployment rates started to climb in the region – growing from 4.69% in 1990 to 6.63% in 2010 (Rama 2015b) – salaries are curtailed, and professional labour substitutes unqualified labour in jobs that habitually required lower training levels.

Education levels in the region also increased as a result of the development of post-graduate studies, a strategy to make further distinctions among the universe of graduates and thus enable access to higher occupational levels of employment[16]; increasing difficulties also foster higher migration levels.

The regional situation is not homogeneous and ample distinctions exist between the countries as a result of their differences in higher education coverage, economic structure and level of professional market saturation. But what is common to all cases is the fact that the massification of higher education has introduced a series of changes, not only in the functioning of each respective educational system but also in the national job market. Some examples may illustrate the common traits and the diversity of situations.

de Vries and Navarro (2011) note that, in spite of the fact that Mexico appears to show low coverage, there are signals of excessive offer, high unemployment rates and low salaries compared to international levels. Nevertheless, the income that results from a higher education is greater when compared with *per capita* GDP, and this would indicate that the labour market is not saturated and that university study continues to deliver additional gains: thus, the pursuit of tertiary credentials would be justified.

Additional, university graduates are not obliged to find work in the labour market that does not require university studies: the professional market continues to generate jobs, albeit with wide wage disparities in different professional areas. Persistent social and economic inequities for university graduates that appear in the labour market may indicate that higher education seems to reinforce differences instead of mitigating them – differences that are linked to social factors and not to academic performance.

The influence of social origin as a determinant of better salaries and better jobs is confirmed by de Vries, Vázquez-Cabrera, and Ríos-Treto (2013). Still, it is not linear: within a context of higher education massification and diversification, 'to inherit the family capital strongly depends on the adequate choice of degree and establishment'. That is, making the right choices is crucial for obtaining the best results and, therefore, it is indispensable to have adequate information on the future benefits of each type of institution[17] and the kind of degree that will be most advantageous.

Dávila León (2011) points out that in Chile the income differential anticipated by a university degree acts as a strong stimulus for the widening of demand for higher studies. The coverage expansion has generated two results: the professional saturation in some fields and the resulting devaluation of the respective degrees; this, in turn, produces an expansion at postgraduate levels, diplomas that become new requisites of the *élite* in a certain field and to assure advantages within the larger social space.

Another mechanism would sustain asymmetry of opportunities in the labour market, where employers demonstrate a preference for graduates of a higher social class.[18] Social origin, in this case, would be a central factor to determine labour market insertion, reserving the best jobs for graduates belonging to the wealthiest social sectors.

Furthermore, according to official data, there is higher employability during the first year after graduation for graduates from the most prestigious universities, as well as of those who earn their professional degrees compared to those completing less prestigious technical degrees (SIES 2015).

In the case of Venezuela, the lack of empirical information is more serious. Nonetheless, the expansion of the number of graduates can be documented along with growing unemployment due to the economy's lack of dynamism and the lack of confidence in graduates from the newly establishment universities (Brunner and Ferrada Hurtado 2011).

A comparison of *Argentina* and *Brazil* offers another perspective as they have different coverage and different employment results for graduates. Interestingly, income for more educated people is 50% higher in low-coverage Brazil than in Argentina (Ruffo and Terracini 2013), where early massification took place.

Argentina has no systematic mechanism for monitoring graduate insertion into the labour market. Partial studies such as that by Riquelme (2005) emphasise the relative overeducation, which was already evident during the 1970s, followed by the subsequent devaluation of educational credentials. On the other hand, the high unemployment rates that affected the overall labour market in the country during the 1990s served to increase employment requirements, improving the situation of higher education graduates, especially university graduates.

A complementary study on *Brazil* (Monsueto 2006) acknowledges the existence of a significant proportion of workers with higher education who are underemployed. This situation is still more acute for women and non-unionised workers, especially those residing in San Pablo, due to the availability of higher education qualifications.

With the nuances of different evidence in each national case, it is apparent that the expansion of higher education diploma tends to accentuate the effect of social variables for insertion into a labour market with relative dynamism. At the same time, expanded access to higher education reduces job opportunities for those who do not hold higher educational credentials.

6. Discussion and conclusions

From the preceding analysis, it follows that, in the last few decades, policies for higher education in our case studies aimed at widening access to this educational level, and incorporating social sectors that had traditionally been absent or under-represented. The different governments developed these policies with the conviction that they would produce social and economic benefits. They nevertheless failed to acknowledge the undesired effects of this expansion in terms of devaluation of educational credentials, the different value of credentials in various disciplines and according to the establishments that award them, and finally, the difficulties that emerge when the labour market cannot absorb the growing numbers of university graduates.

These policies implied stronger involvement by the State in higher education, as guarantor of the expansion of rights and access, and in many cases, in contrast with the policies of the last decade of the twentieth century. Moreover, policies were implemented through diverse initiatives that, in general terms, coincided in the different countries included in this study; thus, the expansion of institutional coverage through the creation of new establishments, in both the public and in the private sectors, and their expansion into interior regions, were complemented by affirmative action policies and increased investment directed at disadvantaged sectors through scholarships.

As a result, enrolment growth included better access to higher education for young people from the lower quintiles of socioeconomic income. Nevertheless, the persistence of these groups within the system was far from what had been expected, and their graduation rates remain low. We assert that the democratisation of the higher level has been limited, and opportunities have been widened but social inequalities have not been reduced. Such meagre results may be explained by different reasons.

First, there is the interaction of tertiary education with the preceding school levels, producing gaps not adequately controlled by the educational system. In other words, even when access to higher education is guaranteed a student's potential for success is strongly influenced by his or her social origin. Second, another element that exaggerates the weight of social status is the hierarchical differentiation among institutions, and the clear distinction between the most selective ones (that tend to cater to privileged social groups) and the demand-absorbing institutions (that cater to new groups enrolling at this level). Finally, within a scenario of expansion of educational awards, the effect of social origin is further strengthened, favouring those who have the advantages of economic and cultural capital, but also social and symbolic capital that allows them to profit from their family relationships for their insertion in the labour market.

The differences in opportunities are therefore present at diverse moments: on the one hand, between those who have access to the higher level and those who do not; on the other, between those who, after gaining access, cannot achieve a diploma or for the group that does achieve the diploma, the type, status and quality of education determined by the

awarding establishment. As enrolment increases, the value of degrees would thus constitute a growingly relevant differential factor, which would nowadays express inequality.

Moreover, the differentiation in the 'market value' of education provided by different institutions must also be related to the economic dynamism of the region and its effects on job creation. It should be emphasised that, even within a context of economic modernisation and sustained growth such as the period of the last 15 years (linked to high international prices for commodities), a slow increase in unemployment rates for higher education graduates was observed, together with a decrease in the return rates of diplomas and the use of professional labour to cover jobs that habitually required less education.

Nevertheless, 'overeducation' (or credentialism), a concern in the educational agenda of developed countries, is new to the region, and has a different significance according to the development level of each economy, the coverage of higher education systems and the degree of professional saturation in the labour market.

It is thus evident that the policies for the expansion of opportunities in higher education that were implemented in the region during the last few decades have resulted in a significant advance in terms of the greater recognition of the rights of marginalised groups and the widening of social bases. These countries still cannot reach an equitable level of diversity and democrtisation of higher education, played out in the reduction of social inequalities. The increase in student numbers, which is a relevant achievement in itself, demands more complex mechanisms to deal with the different aspects of the problem that we have attempted to highlight through the theoretical and empirical analysis, which, regardless of scarce and fragmented data, illustrates general tendencies.

Higher education, however, will not be able to face this challenge by itself. It is the coordination with wider public policy that may narrow the inequality gap. In such unequal societies as those of Latin America, it is imperative that the potential of higher education be maximised, simultaneously acknowledging the limitations derived from assigning the challenge exclusively to this sector alone.

Notes

1. Among these positions that underline the beneficial effects that mere educational expansion could achieve, we may find other widely known positions such as Rawls' equality of opportunities, and those which acknowledge the incidence of a high educational level in terms of income, such as Shultz's human capital and the signalling hypothesis. The latter assigns education for the function of identifying the productive potentiality of applicants to a position, thus providing the company with a tool for candidate selection.
2. Among others, credentialism (Collins 1979; Dore 1980), reproductivism (Bourdieu 1991), the theses on diploma devaluation and inflation (Duru-Bellat 2006), rational choice (Boudon 1974) and overeducation (Van Damme 2014).
3. In this regard, Teichler (2005) states that employment and workplace situation of university graduates 'are condemned to a higher diversification and, as a whole, to be increasingly less privileged as higher education becomes generalized'.
4. Coincidentally, Chauvel (2010) points out that diploma devaluation corresponds tightly with the interests of the older generations that retain the best positions.
5. 'Opportunities' depend on the access to scarce credentials, employments and networks. For societies, this implies that what will be offered to winners cannot be offered to the entire population, as there are not enough good job positions. This explains the attraction exerted (in terms of demand) by *élite* universities, as they are exclusive rather than inclusive (Brown 2003).

6. Many authors reject the thesis of 'overschooling', as it masks a utilitarian notion of education whose sole purpose is to prepare people for the labour market or to increase individual gains (Brown 2003; Duru-Bellat 2015).
7. The thesis of overschooling applied to the proliferation of master diplomas in France is studied by González (2015).
8. This reiterates what occurs at the middle schooling level: in 2010, only 21.7% of 20–24-year-old people of the poorest quintile of their countries had completed secondary schooling, while 78.3% of those pertaining to the richest quintile had finished this level (UNESCO 2013).
9. According to data from IBGE (2012), 82% of the poorest 10% of the population is black, while 75% of the richest 1% is white. Regional differences are also significant, as the most deprived sectors are concentrated in the north and northeast regions, and the wealthiest in the centre-west, south and southeast regions. Average salary presents moreover great differences as per skin colour; and if the average years of schooling are considered, whites reach 8.2 while for blacks they are 6.4.
10. The total number of establishments in Mexico presents, between 2005 and 2009, a global increase of 14% (308 higher education institutions in absolute terms); there exist nevertheless different growth rhythms as per management sector: the increase in public establishments is 6.6%, while that of private establishments is around 18%. On the other hand, public higher education institutions have contributed 18% to overall growth, and private ones 82% (Gil Antón and Pérez García 2011).
11. The bulk of private universities was found during the 1990s; on the contrary, during the 12 years of the Kirchner and Fernández de Kirchner administrations there was a sustained expansion of public universities. Statistical data nevertheless show a slow expansion of enrolment in private establishments.
12. They are *intercultural* because they provide a privileged space for the dialogue among cultures, but they are also open, that is, they are not exclusively for indigenous students: they aim at incorporating diverse population groups.
13. 'The 'municipalisation' of university education implies its orientation towards the regional and the local, taking as reference point the specific culture of populations, with their needs, problems, heritages, exigencies and potentialities' (MPPEU 2010, 44).
14. The main criticisms of these accelerated expansion of academic offer concentrate on two issues: the quality of implemented learning, and the ideological control thereby exerted (Mundó 2009; García Guadilla 2011). For an analysis of the Venezuelan experience from the concept of 'revolutionary reform', see Griffiths (2013).
15. Fundayacucho offers two economic assistance mechanisms: the first is made up of interinstitutional agreements signed with state organisms and with public or private, national or foreign universities; the second functions through scholarships in a programme open to all higher education students, to study either in Venezuela or abroad.
16. This strategy may be interpreted as a way to face the 'opportunity trap' described by Brown (2003).
17. In this sense, graduates from private universities earn higher income than those from public establishments. This may be due to the fact that the offspring of higher schooling and income families choose private institutions. On the other hand, in the labour market, employees tend to recruit, for the better paid jobs, personnel from the *élite* private universities, confirming thus that the student's decision was correct (de Vries, Vázquez-Cabrera, and Ríos-Treto 2013).
18. Quoting a 2004 study by the Universidad de Chile elaborated by Núñez and Martínez, the author remarks that

> between two applicants to the same job, both with the same degree, obtained from the same institution in the same year, the one who has more possibilities to be chosen to fill the vacancy is the one whose surname is more 'distinguished', who comes from a more 'prestigious' secondary school, who has better contacts … [that is,] a better class position. (Dávila León 2011, 162)

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