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topics for a new agenda in public policies**

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Abstract. After a period of unregulated growth from the 1960s to the late 1980s, Mexican public higher education came to be perceived as a ‘disaster zone’ by the federal government. Starting at that point, several public policies seeking to improve its quality, social relevance, efficiency and equity have been implemented. While impacting positively on Mexican higher education in many respects, such policies have had unintended negative effects and, it is contended, they are currently showing diminishing gains. This paper identifies six topics that the next generation of public policies should address if Mexican public higher education is to evolve into a stage in which its current shortcomings are diminished and its social relevance improved: the evaluation of public policies, the increasing complexity of the system, its coordination, its openness, the role of financial resources and, finally, the academic profession.

Keywords: Mexican higher education, public policies, system-wide change

Introduction

In 1989, after nearly 20 years of unregulated growth, followed by a downfall in funding in which faculty salaries shrank to around 40% of their previous levels (Gil-Antón, 2002), public higher

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education was implicitly declared by the Mexican government a disaster zone and, accordingly, became the subject of a modernizing effort that would bring it to a level found in developed countries. Consistent with such governmental appraisal, the following years witnessed the formulation of new public policies targeted at such general goals, ranging from the promotion of entrance examinations for students looking to be admitted to higher education institutions (HEIs) previously non-existent in most HEIs, to efforts to develop institutional information systems that would provide valid, reliable and timely information to institutional leaders and federal officials who, in turn, would have better information to evaluate and on which accordingly to fund HEIs. Notwithstanding the traditional autonomy with which public state institutions had governed and managed themselves up to that point in time, their internal organization and functioning was directly affected by these policies, and so the Mexican higher education (MHE) landscape started an intense change process that is still in progress.

Following the lead of the then under-secretariat of Higher Education and Scientific Research, the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (*Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior*, ANUIES), published in 2000 the report "Higher Education in the Twenty First Century: Strategic lines for its development", in which ANUIES explicitly stated that MHE confronted, in the context of an increasingly globalized world, four main challenges: improving its quality, increasing its social relevance, becoming more efficient and, finally, becoming more equitable to under-represented groups in higher education (ANUIES, 2000, pp.2-4).¹

The public policies implemented since the modernization discourse of the late 1980s have been described by Kent-Serna (2005) as having an important impact on MHE and, at the same time, not being able to move it to the expected performance levels. Notwithstanding the correctness of such general comment, a detailed and balanced appraisal of the impact of those public policies remains a pending task.

Assuming that the main challenges that MHE faces have been adequately identified at a general and systemic level, in this paper we want to call attention to a set of topics that need to be considered if MHE is to improve significantly in the years to come. In the context of many changes that have taken place since the late 1980s, MHE is at a crossroads in the sense that the national public policies currently in place are showing diminishing gains in improving MHE. Under these circumstances it is convenient to review topics that provide alternatives to the identified weaknesses of the way in which national public policies and programs are functioning. Some of the proposed topics are structural and some are cultural, but in both cases they need to be considered in order to avoid the risk of drifting into

¹ When Vicente Fox became the first Mexican president not to come from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) since the 1930s, Julio Rubio Oca, then executive secretary of ANUIES and with central responsibility for the 2000 ANUIES report, became the under-secretary of Higher Education and Scientific Research. In this position Julio Rubio Oca promoted the agenda that ANUIES had made officially its own a short time before.

a situation in which the contribution of higher education to Mexican development and the general well-being of its population falls short of its potential.

The paper is divided into three sections and, because of the space available, many details have been only mentioned briefly and some omitted entirely. The references given in the text should provide complementary information for those interested in particular issues. The first section briefly describes the evolution of MHE and the main federal programs implemented since the late 1980s. The core of this paper, the second section, discusses six topics that need to be recognized and addressed if MHE is to improve. Finally, the concluding comments provide a small set of reflections on the material previously presented. It is hoped that the ideas behind this text might be of some help in moving from discussion of the identified topics to generation of new public policies related to them.

Mexican higher education today

Growth and development

In this section we will describe briefly MHE accomplishments and challenges as of today. Among the accomplishments we can cite its growth (students, faculty, institutions and programs); its progressive decentralization; the professionalization of its academic faculty and, quite importantly, the yet to be consolidated spread of a new culture of pertinence, evaluation and accountability. The still pending challenges are in essence the same as those reported by ANUIES in 2000: improving quality, increasing social relevance, becoming more efficient and, finally, becoming more equitable to social groups under-represented in higher education (ANUIES, 2006).

Several authors (Kent-Serna, 1993; Gil-Anton, 1996; Grediaga-Kuri, 2000) identify four stages in the development of MHE. First from 1960 to 1969, there was a period of moderate expansion of the system. A highly accelerated expansion of HEIs characterized the second period, from 1970 to 1982. The third period achieved slower growth of the higher education system during 1982 to 1989 as a result of the economic crisis arising from the decline in oil prices and the country's increasing international debt. In order to overcome this situation, the federal government and public HEIs initiated a more rational and planned relationship that emphasized financial issues and institutional self-evaluation.

Finally, the fourth period, from 1990 to the present time, has been characterized by a renewed expansion and diversification of the higher education system, in which the private sector has grown, largely in an unregulated way, and public efforts have been targeted at underprivileged populations by way of increasing enrollment in existing HEIs and by creating institutions such as the technological, and intercultural universities. At the same time, there has been a move toward evaluation (efficiency and efficacy) and accountability. Federal policies encouraged HEIs to adopt a "culture of evaluation" and to modernize their structures. During this period federal funding was maintained at a 'survival'

level, and a very significant proportion of the additional financial support needed each passing year was granted to HEIs on the basis of project competition and institutional and program evaluation. In this way the federal government promoted implementation of evaluation policies mainly in the public higher education system, where the largest percentage of all undergraduate students is located as well as most activities related to graduate education and research. In this period a crisis of confidence in public higher education emerged, and new social sectors started demanding new academic models, greater social and economic relevance, and public accountability. The evaluation policies could be seen as part of a response by the government to regain legitimacy.

National public policies and programs in higher education

In this section we will briefly describe the key federal programs that have steered, pushed and pulled MHE during the last 20 years. Specifically, at the institutional level we will talk about the Integral Program for Institutional Strengthening (*Programa Integral para el Fortalecimiento Institucional*, PIFI) (Rubio-Oca, 2006); at the student level we will comment on the National Scholarship Program (*Programa Nacional de Becas*, PRONABES) and, finally, we will describe the Program for the Improvement of the Professoriate (*Programa para el Mejoramiento del Profesorado*, PROMEP) (Urbano-Vidales, Aguilar-Sahagún & Rubio-Oca, 2006).

It is important to note that due to the institutional autonomy of state public HEIs in Mexico, many federal policies are not mandatory, even though the acceptance of these policies can influence the institutional level of financing supported by the federal government. However, with the movement away from a benevolent system to a performance-based funding model, the federal government developed for itself, despite the autonomy discourse, a strong influence in the development of HEIs through federal financing policies and programs such as those described below (Mendoza-Rojas, 2002).

At the institutional level the Integral Program for Institutional Strengthening (*Programa Integral de Fortalecimiento Institucional*, PIFI), was enacted in 2001 (Rubio-Oca, 2006a). In this way the National Evaluation and Accreditation System was provided with a 'funding arm' to the extent that it incorporated various previous funding programs that provided additional federal funds to those public HEIs that were willing to carry on strategic planning and evaluation with an emphasis on the improvement of the quality of educational services; quality had been defined essentially by the federal agencies involved in the program and – an issue that has been contested by different academic communities – rests on the acceptance at face value of a set of indicators that are amenable to manipulation independent of the underlying processes.

The PIFI program rests on two main concepts directly related to the academic life of a HEI, and on one additional consideration related to the institution's administration. The core concepts are academic capacity and academic competitiveness. Academic capacity refers essentially to the profile

of the academic faculty that work in an institution and is directly related to the proportion of academics that holds a graduate degree and, at the same time, has a level of productivity that enables them to be recognized as having a “desirable profile,” as they are members of the National Researchers System and, in recent years, have been grouped together in “academic bodies.”

Academic competitiveness, on the other hand, refers centrally to the number of academic programs that are accredited. In this aspect PIFI requires from HEIs organization of their academic programs, irrespective of their internal academic organization (Departments and Faculties, for example), in entities called “Higher Education Units” (*Dependencias de Educación Superior*), which integrate programs in related disciplinary and professional fields. These entities have now become the center of institutions’ planning efforts.

Finally, in the administrative arena PIFI has encouraged institutions both to order their administrative procedures and to make more efficient and transparent use of public funds that public HEIs receive. In particular, PIFI has encouraged institutions, among other things, to train administrative personnel, to modernize their infrastructure and information systems and, in a particularly visible way, to certify their administrative procedures through quality-assurance mechanisms typical of those found in private organizations (Rubio-Oca, 2006a). It is not clear, however, that these measures have had a positive impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the implicated procedures (Díaz-Barriga, Barrón-Tirado & Díaz-Barriga-Arceo, 2008).

Directed to students, PRONABES has been generally considered a very successful program. It has been shown to reach the intended population and it has also promoted the retention and graduation of groups of students that otherwise most probably would not have remained in the system (ANUIES, 2006; Rubio-Oca, 2006b). In this way PRONABES has contributed significantly to making access to and graduation from higher education somewhat more equitable, although at present the enrollment rate is around approximately 25% (ANUIES, 2006). Another national program, although this one operated from ANUIES, which was formulated to promote equity, was the National Tutoring Program (ANUIES, 2002).

At faculty level the Program for the Improvement of the Professoriate, (*Programa para el Mejoramiento del profesorado, PROMEP*) was designed, following the antecedent of the SUPERA-ANUIES program (*Programa Nacional de Superación del Personal Académico*), by the undersecretariat of Higher Education and Scientific Research in 1996, to help increase the number of highly trained full-time faculty members in public institutions. Unlike many programs, PROMEP has remained functioning throughout three different presidential terms of the country and is currently a key component of the institutional PIFI program. Nowadays PROMEP focuses mainly on three aspects. First, it has promoted an increment in the number of full-time faculty with a “desirable profile” through a faculty hiring policy requiring that only professors who have already earned graduate degrees can occupy new full-time faculty appointments. Second, PROMEP has fostered in-service full-time faculty acquisition of graduate education by way of granting scholarships to current

faculty members. Third, the program has tried to foster academic collaboration by requiring academics to organize themselves in academic bodies that integrate activities of generation and application of knowledge.

However, several studies (Gil-Antón, *et al.*, 1994; Grediaga-Kuri, 2000) have shown that a formal full-time appointment is not sufficient to guarantee a high involvement in academic life. Some full-time faculty members tend to combine their academic jobs with other paid professional activities. Nevertheless, as a result of the PROMEP policy 8,406 new full-time faculty positions have been created between 1996 and 2005, of which more than 2,000 have received support to acquire academic equipment.

PROMEP has also fostered in-service full-time faculty acquisition of graduate education on the basis of a policy that consists of granting scholarships to current faculty members so that they can earn a master's or PhD degree. According to Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) (2006), in 1998 about 8% of all full-time faculty in public universities had obtained a PhD, while by 2006 the proportion had risen to 22%. Notwithstanding these accomplishments, there is concern about the quality of graduate programs specifically designed to meet the training needs of current professors. These programs could very well satisfy the need to increase the number of faculty in the higher education system with PhD degrees, but their contribution to the training of specialized professionals is not as clear as it might be.

Another PROMEP policy fosters the development of academic bodies in order to facilitate the integration of teaching and research. According to the operational rules, institutions are to organize academic bodies that in turn can be identified by SEP in terms of being in training, in a consolidation stage or already consolidated (SEP, 2006). These academic bodies receive, according to their level of development, some financial support to implement projects that may allow them to obtain the required level of academic productivity. Notwithstanding this, in some cases faculty members have perceived this policy as an imposition, which has somehow forced them to become part of an academic body in which the members are not all productive, or are not all willing to work collaboratively. They feel that an unintended effect of this policy is the simulation of the existence of an academic body that can qualify to receive financial resources.

Since the early 1990s, federal programs and policies have fostered the appearance of a "differential salary scale for academics based on research productivity and the quality of teaching with special salary supplements for full-time academics who meet certain standards" (Kent, 1993, p.79). HEIs (mainly public) have implemented programs of economic stimulus based on evaluation of faculty productivity. One issue with this strategy, however, is the fact that income from merit pay systems might represent as much as 60% of the total income of an academic (Gil-Antón, 2002). A second much debated aspect is the general perception that these systems favor research over teaching activities and that, as with other processes that rely very heavily on indicators, they also tend to promote simulation (Cordero-Arroyo, Galaz-Fontes & Sevilla-García, 2003).

Topics for a long-term vision of Mexican higher education

Having briefly described the current state of MHE, including the main challenges that it faces, we now turn to a set of reflections on several topics that need to be addressed if MHE is to improve its functioning and be in a better position to increase its relevance in an effective and efficient way. Specifically, we will deal with the topics of (1) public policy evaluation, (2) the increasing complexity of MHE, (3) the coordination of the higher education system in Mexico, (4) openness and mobility within the system, (5) reconfiguration of the academic profession, and finally (6) the limits of money.

Evaluation of national public policies and programs

In an accountable democracy every effort should be made to openly evaluate public policies. In the case of MHE there are evaluation studies of national public policies and programs that have been performed both by organizations responsible for them (*e.g.*, Urbano-Vidales, Aguilar-Sahagún, & Rubio-Oca, 2006; Rubio-Oca, 2006b), and by external academics (*e.g.*, Díaz-Barriga, 2008). However, if one considers the amount of financial resources managed in the context of such policies as well as the goals of higher education, then there is a clear need for more and better evaluation. Particularly relevant when evaluating public policies, evaluation studies should make holistic and balanced analyses of a policy or a program in terms of achieved goals, collateral unintended negative consequences, costs and benefits.

Given its role as the key player in developing national public policies and programs, it is only natural to expect the under-secretariat of Higher Education to be the official body that should be most interested in promoting evaluation studies of the national public policies that they enact. Such studies, on the other hand, should be done by different groups of experts with a variety of methodologies and measurement instruments, so that more aspects of these programs can be considered.

In addition to the need for promoting more evaluation studies regarding national public policies and programs, much more attention should be given to the distribution and uses of their results. Given the availability of technology, it is indeed surprising how little information is distributed regarding research on national public policies. Both the under-secretariat and independent scholars should make extra efforts in order to make accessible to academics all over the country the materials and findings generated by these studies.

A most important issue regarding evaluation studies is the extent to which high-ranking officials pay attention to what these studies have to say and the extent to which these officials are willing to change in the direction that the information generated might suggest. The existence of a productive dialogue between high-ranking officials and researchers studying national public policies and programs is not currently the norm, and it appears that national public policies and programs once

implemented are by definition seen as correct by their creators, who therefore usually expect the higher education community to endorse them. The alternative, of having national public policies and programs not recognized as appropriate, is usually taken as proof that those not accepting such policies and programs are against everything and/or are unable to see the benefits those policies and programs bring with them.

On the complexity of Mexican higher education

Mexican higher education has grown in size and complexity: more and more different students, more and more professionalized faculty, more and more varied academic tasks, more and more support activities and personnel. Nonetheless, it seems that, except for a few big and influential public and private HEIs, new demands are being confronted with essentially the same organizational structures and the same personnel that were in place several decades ago.

In the educational arena, student services is an area in need of considerable stimulus. Nowadays it is an underdeveloped and pre-professional area, and often faculty are required to take care of activities that should be a responsibility of professional advisors, psychologists, librarians and student services personnel. Academics requested to take charge of such a variety of functions are not only overloaded but are being condemned to perform in an amateur way tasks for which they are not adequately prepared. At the same time, student services receive neither the recognition nor the support that they deserve.

In much the same way, there is little understanding of support services that faculty should receive in order for them to be more productive in their central tasks of teaching, research and service. Teaching improvement centers and programs, or funding support offices are not as common as they should be. Faculty are expected to do everything related to their core responsibilities but such a situation demands increasing amounts of time and academics are therefore confronted with a no-win situation in relation to the central tasks they are supposed to engage in.

Finally, MHE institutions need a more specialized administrative staff and, particularly in positions having to do with the core institutional tasks, a staff more knowledgeable about higher education, its academic life and culture, and with an attitude of service towards both students and faculty.

On the coordination of the higher education system

In parallel to what happens in the national political arena, there is at present a growing tension between the control exerted by the center and the decentralizing expectation of an increasing number of higher education actors. The tension between centralism and federalism is at the base of the discussion of the coordination of MHE. While national public policies usually imply a unique set of

criteria being applied in much the same way across the states, which are considerably different in their circumstances and development, there are sectors at the state- and even at the municipal-levels, which claim larger margins for maneuver. Why not generate a national system, not from the 'center' to the 'periphery', but rather one located in the country as whole – one in which the terms center and periphery loose meaning?

The actual challenge can be phrased in the following way: how to decentralize not only the operation but also the generation of policies and programs without, at the same time, dividing the country? That is to say, the challenge is to replace a central structure with a new federal structure that regulates basic aspects of the system but at the same time leaves wide spaces for the initiative and creativity of the states, including the possibility of generating regional educational spaces that go beyond the traditional administrative criteria that were mainly derived from central control.

Many higher education actors prefer the discretionary rationality of the center (the under-secretariat of Higher Education) to the discretionary non-rationality of state and local authorities and, not infrequently, the institutional authorities themselves. Conceptually there is no problem in accepting the convenience of being decentralized, but in practice there is much more confidence in the competencies of central authorities. This situation is closely associated with differences in the profile and balance of entities such as the national *versus* the local congress, or the influence of national organizations such as the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions, *versus* State Planning Commissions, many of them existing only as bureaucratic agencies that are in charge of collecting data for governmental bodies.

This dilemma points towards a solution that might be gradual: building local and regional control systems to counterbalance the central ones. Given that a federal system would take time to establish, it is crucial to accept that problems would appear at the local level. However, this horizon is less dangerous, in terms of the evolution of the system, than maintaining central control. Local disturbances, however, could be diminished to the extent that local and institutional units are reinforced.

After almost 30 years with the same higher education law, the new conditions demand a new law regarding higher education coordination. However, is it better to promote a new law directly or, would it be wiser to proceed for a limited period by way of specific agreements? Maybe more progress can be achieved from making concrete specific agreements that pave the way for a future law.

The centralism/federalism debate is crucial for the formulation of a new kind of national policies and programs. Should Mexico work towards becoming an open or closed system; vertically controlled or with increasing degrees of horizontality; dependant upon decisions taken in the capital or interdependent and in need of becoming more coordinated, but with allowances for regional and state idiosyncrasies within reasonable degrees of unity? In other words, will the center keep dealing with the states as if these were under-aged and in need of direction and even micro-administering HEIs? The situation in the states is quite heterogeneous, but centralization is not the only reasonable

implication of such a situation. An alternative route is to build an intelligent vision of decentralization that, on the one hand helps improve planning and implementation tools, and on the other allows states, which already have such tools in place, to take full responsibility for being relatively autonomous in their development and assuming the benefits and costs associated with it.

Openness and mobility within the system

A by-product of the centralism that characterizes MHE is that its actors have little opportunity to move from one institution to another, particularly if the movement does not imply passing through the center of the system. It is probably no exaggeration to state that for students and academics is easier to move to and from institutions outside the country than to move within it. Many institutions are in fact islands and their isolation impedes seeing the higher education system as an emergent property that stems from the relationships among its institutional components. Centralism produces dependency, not dynamism and variation.

However, there are efforts targeted at resolving this situation. A national credit system would allow students to move from their original institutions but up to now HEIs have only been willing to recognize a relatively small fraction of the work done in other institutions.

Faculty mobility in terms of academics taking jobs at different institutions, without which it is nonsense to talk about an academic market, requires the liberalization of benefits associated with income (seniority mainly, as it represents a significant proportion of a faculty member's income), so that they might be portable from one institution to another. The current situation, in which faculty with a relatively small number of years of seniority are discouraged from moving to other institutions, promotes endogamy and limits seriously the incorporation of new perspectives that faculty coming from other institutions might bring with them. Not having an open market for the academic profession limits considerably the enrichment of its academic personnel.

By the same logic, MHE needs to eliminate barriers and stimulate the mobility of university administrators. Due to the way power is attained and distributed within HEI, academics and other professionals with genuine interest and skills in the administrative arena are forced to associate themselves with the dynamics of local power groups. This is indeed a very interesting factor that works against decentralization and against opening the system. These groups, which in some instances include governing boards that have build an exchange-of-favors network, would be among the losers from a new state of affairs, and it is only natural to expect strong resistance from them. One important task of a federal entity would be to deal with such situations by stimulating organization of faculty as a balancing factor.

Mexican culture in general is not very mobile and additionally there are specific situations that deter professional mobility in general (the high costs of credit for buying a house, for example). So, it is necessary to create incentives for academic mobility, which should not be limited to money but

include, perhaps in a larger proportion, opportunities for professional development. Academic and administrative mobility, on the other hand, would entail costs, especially high at institutions that have been traditionally isolated. The discussion of academic mobility reminds us that the higher education system should not only move away from a centrally-controlled system but should also be careful not to run into a situation in which local feuds are reinforced. Avoiding such a possibility in the creation of an open academic market for students, faculty and administrators would help create a system in which regulation of the system would be distributed across the entire system.

The reconfiguration of the academic profession

While students pass through HEI, faculty remain and constitute those who are ultimately responsible for the core activities of these institutions, namely teaching, research and service. MHE treatment of its most valuable resource, however, is not consistent with such a perspective.

Mexican academics, particularly those on full-time contracts, have been the objects of a series of national and institutional policies, which during the last decades, have demanded from them an increasing number and variety of activities (teaching, tutoring students, research, extension activities, administrative responsibilities, fund raising, etc.). In the process of becoming a professional, centered in knowledge according to the new scholarship notion advanced by Boyer (1990), the Mexican academic is forced to act as an amateur in many activities that are now being implemented in response to new needs that HEIs have identified. At the same time, it has also been demanded that they increase their level of training and, because of the low salaries, complement their income as an exclusive or almost-exclusive dedication to the academe is insufficient to maintain a middle-class living standard.

One form of salary complementation is to become a member of the National Researchers System, and so receive significant merit-pay. This provides an acceptable income for a low proportion of the faculty, but these remuneration schemes have unexpected consequences. Because the largest proportion of their income comes now from sources outside their home institutions, these are now seen by many to constitute not so much a community of scholars and students in pursuit of purposes that at least overlap somewhat but rather as platforms from which it is possible to pursue further initiatives that will bring in more money both to themselves and to their institutions. As might be expected, these modern academics have little disposition to behave as citizens of their institutions (Organ, 1990), as such an activity requires time and for them time is valuable in maintaining their merit-pay income.

Not only has there been change in the work of Mexican faculty but also in themselves as persons. Mexican academics, like many others in the world, are growing older and approaching retirement. With the current schemes it appears that many academics will keep working as long as they can in order to retain what they consider an appropriate income. This fact has large implications for the

new generation of academics, particularly because there is still no clarity regarding the trajectory of an academic career and, as has already been mentioned, there is no real academic job market.

On the other hand, two-thirds of Mexican faculty are hired on a part-time basis. These colleagues require special attention in regard to various aspects, including professional development programs and hiring policies that would allow them to have a more stable job and, in that context, contribute to an institution's mission in a more significant manner. Nevertheless, these faculty members are consistently excluded from federal, state and institutional policies.

The limits of money

Mexican higher education has indeed improved during the last three decades. Notwithstanding the fact that the situation is heterogeneous and that in certain areas it has largely remained the same or even deteriorated, the main mechanism for change has been, largely a "stick and carrot" national public policy, with probably many more carrots than sticks. Money has been the carrot for institutions and faculty to change, while the stick has been, not the dismissal of academics or the firing of incompetent or fraudulent personnel, but maintaining them with resources just sufficient to enable them to survive. To this end the under-secretariat of Higher Education adopted performance-dependant financing. Quite regrettably, there has been little collective discussion regarding the reasonableness of the programs and measures taken by the central authority.

If money had not been in place as the main incentive would change have taken place? Two reasons make us believe the answer would be "no." In the first place, there has been an abdication from exercise of legitimate academic and institutional authority. Instead of firing faculty who do not work it was decided to pay more to faculty who do indeed work; institutions with improvement programs were reinforced instead of having national, state or local authorities assume their role as legitimate leaders. If our authorities do not recover their leadership role, with the associated exercise of authority, money will be the only reason for change and, although money changes short-term behavioral patterns, it does not generate solid academic traditions and cultures.

Secondly, the vast majority of full-time Mexican faculty receives a salary low in comparison with that of professionals with equivalent training working in the public or private sector. Moreover an important proportion of their total income (as much as 60% for the highest paid academics) comes from merit-pay systems, both internal and external to the institution. This situation has prompted academics to become largely interested in the economic consequences of their work and to assume an individualistic perspective in their work that diminishes the possibilities of creating academic communities intra- and inter-institutionally (Suárez-Zozaya & Muñoz-García, 2004).

Concluding Comments

While MHE has made significant progress during the last 30 or so years, it needs to consider changing some of its fundamental ways of functioning. New ways of thinking about higher education are needed. As the very first step we need to evaluate in a very critical way the current national policies and programs that are being implemented in higher education. Not everything is white or black, and independent and systematic evaluations would provide valuable information that can help us accept that:

- Mexican higher education needs a core set of national public policies, which corresponds to the conditions under which higher education is to function. At the same time, it also needs a larger set of differentiating policies, which would allow each HEI to pursue its mission in the context of the space that it occupies. Mexico needs to move from having a small set of “national,” usually centrally located, institutions to a system in which a larger group of institutions is competitive and of high quality.
- Although little attention was paid to the subject matter on this occasion, Mexican HEI have functioned, until relatively recently, under the culture of the Mexican political system. In this context there is a need to increase the transparency with which resources are handled and the consequent associated accountability (Gil-Antón, 2008).
- Although MHE has come a long way from a period in which its functioning reflected essentially political processes both within and beyond its boundaries (Levy, 1980), attention should be given to the promotion of local, informed, professional and responsible power centers that could counterbalance both the centralism of current policies and local feuds associated with groups with strong political traditions outside higher education.
- There needs to be an open market not only for students but for faculty and highly specialized administrators. The movement of highly skilled personnel will help to level the terrain across the country and as well help open up HEIs that have been isolated for decades. Considering the extensive interaction between academics in their role as such and as administrators, particular attention should be given to preparing those academics taking administrative positions so as to maximize opportunities for academics to become administrators and high-ranking officials.

There are other specific recommendations that stem from the above reflections but they need to be considered in the context of the particularities of specific regions of the country, HEIs, faculty and students. There are many ways in which these changes could be promoted but a fundamental issue is to let go our fear of not having central control of the system and move the control and funding roles from the federal government to the state level. Subsequently, it will be appropriate to recognize that building the politics of such a fundamental change is a pending task.

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