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Field of Higher Education Research in Latin America



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Synonyms

[Higher Education in Latin America as a Field of Studies](#); [Research on Higher Education in Latin America](#); [Studies about Higher Education in Latin America](#)

Definition

The characteristics, practices, activities, and areas of knowledge about higher education in Latin America.

Introduction

Research and studies about higher education in Latin America has changed profoundly since the 1990's. Thirty years ago, José Joaquín Brunner's (1988) review of the field pointed at the pre-eminence of social and historical studies – rooted in the disciplines of history, sociology, political science, and economics – over organizational, administrative, and institutional approaches.

Brunner argued at the time that sociohistorical perspectives were at a crossroads, not having produced innovative knowledge in the field. On the other hand, he reasoned that organizational approaches developed to facilitate an understanding of change and institutional adaptation were primarily suited for analyzing colleges and universities in highly developed and industrialized countries. In the end, after evaluating the impact of external and internal approaches in the field, he concluded that the strengths of one perspective were the weaknesses of the other. Furthermore, it became clear that neither approach was able to advance a full understanding of change in higher education without including elements from the other (1988).

Growth and Consolidation Patterns

At the end of the second decade of this century, the field of higher education in the region is characterized by four noteworthy patterns. First, there has been significant growth in all types of academic publications about higher education – books, articles, and book chapters – in which an increasing number of Latin American specialists have analyzed the realities and transformation processes within regional higher education systems and institutions. Since the turn of the century, in particular, academic journal publications, from authors within Latin America, have increased substantially, both in regional

(Scientific Electronic Library Online, SciELO) and global (Scopus and Web of Science) indexed journals. Searches conducted in these databases produced the following results: 14,000 articles in 500 journals in SciELO; more than 16,000 articles in 160 journals in Scopus; and more than 4000 publications in 100 journals in Web of Science.

A second pattern reveals the varied levels of analysis, addressed by Latin American scholars, including: international comparative studies; systemic and thematically focused regional inquiries; and national and institutional research and case studies. There is also a growing degree of disciplinary and thematic specialization, which is reflected in the research on specific educational, demographic, social, political, economic, and cultural problems related to contemporary higher education in the region. At the same time, an important accomplishment in the field has been the growing convergence toward the most relevant international debates in higher education represents.

Third, the basic conditions for research production, and its degree of international circulation, have improved significantly. Research centers and graduate programs devoted to educational research have been created in each country, primarily within public universities. There are also a host of new academic journals specializing in education and higher education – like the *Revista Argentina de Educación Superior* (2008, Argentina), *Revista Colombiana de Educación Superior* (2008, Colombia), *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación Superior* (2010, Mexico), and *Revista Brasileira de Ensino Superior* (2015, Brazil) –, and institutional research projects and units have been set up in order to inform higher education assessment and planning processes. Among the latter are the *Seminario de Educación Superior* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2003) and the *Centro de Estudios sobre Universidad y Educación Superior* (Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, Argentina, 2016), and the *Instituto de Gestión y Liderazgo Universitario* (at the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education, 2002). Finally, academic work on higher education has been professionalized, favorably impacting research practices, data

organization and analyses, and the originality of results.

A fourth pattern is the considerable diversity and consistency in the themes and topics addressed in higher education studies in Latin America. The aforementioned three sources of literature, which are analyzed more thoroughly in the next sections of this chapter, reveal a high level of coherence in the most relevant research areas.

These patterns are more a consequence of changes in Latin American higher education than effects of the endogenous evolution of knowledge within the field. Latin America is not a homogeneous region in terms of its social and economic development, nor in its government systems and political orientation. In spite of differences, many similar processes and problems can be identified. Among the most relevant changes in the region are: sustained undergraduate and graduate enrollment growth; regional deconcentration of public and private provision; institutional diversification; establishment of evaluation, accreditation, and quality assurance systems; competition for public subsidies and competitive funding mechanisms; renewed emphasis on technical and vocational tertiary education; the expansion of distance education and the use of information technologies; increasing private and transnational investment in HE; incentives for international mobility of students and collaborative research; attention to governance and coordination of national systems and institutions; and the reorganization of science, technology, and innovation systems.

Thematic Diversity and Consistency

For the purpose of this study, three distinct and relevant types of publications in the field were selected in order to identify the most recurrent areas and topics of research. First, the titles, abstracts, keywords, and bibliographies of edited book and chapter publications for the UNESCO Regional Conferences on Higher Education (*Conferencia Regional de Educación Superior*, CRES) in 1996, 2008, and 2018 were reviewed. That process was

replicated with the six volumes published by the UNIVERSIA–CINDA research project on higher education in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries (*Espacio Iberoamericano del Conocimiento*, EIC). The final step involved examining the body of articles on higher education published in journals indexed by the SciELO regional database.

UNESCO Regional Conferences on Higher Education

The restoration of democracy in the late 1980s and the identification of economic and social development challenges, in the context of the emerging process of globalization, created new demands for the reorganization of higher education, science, and technology systems throughout Latin America. In many countries, there were intense debates over the best ways to address problems of limited enrollments, quality, and the relevance of higher education in the region (Yarzabal 1997; Rodríguez-Gómez 1998). These discussions extended to the 1996, 2008, and 2018 conferences that have brought together the largest and most prominent gatherings of regional scholars and public higher education leaders and have assembled a collection of high quality and relevant research on higher education in Latin America, every 10 years.

CRES 1996

Starting in 1995, the UNESCO Regional Center for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (CRESALC) organized a series of conferences in preparation for the upcoming World Higher Education Conference (WHEC-98) in Paris in 1998. In total, more than 20 preparatory meetings were held in different countries. These discussions yielded a series of academic publications that were gathered into 11 edited volumes. They covered five broad topics: pertinence; quality, institutional assessment, and accreditation; management and financing; knowledge and the use of new information and communication technologies; and international cooperation (Caló 1996; Crespo and Yarzabal 1996; Didriksson 1995; García Guadilla 1996; Pallán Figueroa 1996; Tellería Geiger 1996; Trindade

and Luce 1996; Tünnermann 1996; Yarzabal 1996a, b; Wainex 1996).

The first UNESCO Regional Conference on Policies and Strategies for the Transformation of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (*Conferencia Regional de la UNESCO sobre Políticas y Estrategias para la Transformación de la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe*, CRES 1996) took place in Havana, Cuba, in 1996. Delegates approved a joint *Declaration about Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean* (CRES 1996) which included specific proposals that were presented during the preparatory meetings. This document constituted a key foundation for academic debates regarding the problems of Latin American higher education, and helped orient public policymakers within the region (Didriksson and Yarzabal 1997; Tünnermann 2008).

CRES 2008

In 1998, UNESCO transformed CRESALC into the Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC). The second Regional Conference on Higher Education (*Conferencia Regional de Educación Superior*, CRES 2008) took place in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, in June 2008. The conference was jointly organized by IESALC and the Colombian National Ministry of Education.

Four edited volumes were published in preparation for the conference (Gazzola and Didriksson 2008; Mato 2008; Schwartzman 2008; Tünnermann 2008; García Guadilla and Rodríguez Cruz 2008), gathering the most renowned regional specialists in the field around the most relevant and pertinent topics. A final edited volume (Tünnermann 2008) included chapters that reflected the discussions in each of the 11 round tables. The conference also approved a final *Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean* and an *Action Plan of the Regional Conference on Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean* (CRES 2008).

Cres 2018

The 2018 Regional Conference on Higher Education (*Conferencia Regional de Educación Superior*, CRES 2018) will take place in June in Córdoba, Argentina. It will be organized by IESALC, the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, and the Argentine Ministry of Education. The Conference will coincide with the 100th anniversary of the 1918 student movement for university reform (*Reforma de Córdoba*). The movement was a major watershed and shaped Latin American higher education throughout the century, with the establishment of autonomy, shared governance, academic freedom, and a strong commitment to societal transformation.

CRES 2018 has been organized along seven thematic lines: higher education as part of the education system; cultural diversity and interculturality; internationalization and regional integration; the role of higher education in addressing social challenges; scientific and technological research and innovation; the strategic role of higher education in sustainable development; and the centennial of the Córdoba Reform movement: towards a new manifesto of Latin American higher education (CRES 2018).

Universia–CINDA Project

In 2006, the Universia network (*Red Universia*), sponsored by the Spanish bank Santander, and a large group of Iberian and Latin American universities established a joint research project with Chile's Interuniversity Development Center (*Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo*, CINDA). This project is framed by Universia's drive to create an Iberian-American area of knowledge with the participation of Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries from Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula (*Espacio Iberoamericano del Conocimiento*), along the lines of the European Higher Education Area. The Universia–CINDA project has generated periodic revisions of the state of higher education in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries which constitute the largest collection of systematic comparative studies in the region.

The 2007, 2011, and 2016 reports have been published in three volumes (Brunner 2007, 2011,

2016) addressing the following issues: challenges faced by higher education in the *Espacio Iberoamericano del Conocimiento*; institutional platforms of HE systems; access and opportunities for students; faculty; advanced human capital formation; financing; government and management; and quality assurance. They include reports for Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela (Andorra, Spain, and Portugal are also included in the country reports). These are written by country specialists and they include statistical and documentary national information. The project also includes special topics reports on science and technology development (Santelices 2010); quality assurance (Lemaitre and Zenteno 2012); and university industry partnerships, innovation, and knowledge transfer (Barro 2015).

Research on Higher Education in SciELO Academic Journals

A review of the body of articles on higher education in the SciELO database represents a good approach to the variety of areas comprising research in the field today. That said, an exact classification of articles based on content is a complex task, given the “fuzzy borderlines” between themes (Teichler 2015) and the multiple issues addressed within each article. Despite such challenges, 14 broad knowledge areas were identified through a search within titles, keywords, and abstracts.

These knowledge areas coincide, to a large extent, with relevant institutional transformation and policy guidelines, and they also reveal university actors' major concerns and interests. According to the number of articles, three of these areas receive prime attention in the literature: faculty and the academic profession; students and their conditions; and reflections about science, technology, and innovation. A second tier of publications encompass topics such as: politics and policy; reform and change; and quality assessment and evaluation. A third grouping includes research on: autonomy; government and

governance; social movements and conflict; social inequality; gender; and student enrolments and access to HE. Two smaller assortments focus on: multiculturalism and diversity; and internationalization. Each of these areas in turn includes a range of specific topics:

1. *Faculty and the academic profession*: with labor and career issues (employment, the nature of academic work, and academic careers); teaching activities; faculty assessment; faculty unions and organizations; and income and benefits (wages, merit pay, and health problems).
2. *Students and their conditions*: addresses the difficulties of access to HE; social differences; race and gender inequality and discrimination; academic trajectories and graduation rates; scholarships and other support structures; and student movements, struggles, and conflict.
3. *Science, technology, and innovation*: branches into three main topics: scientific research and academic scholarship; science teaching and graduate studies; applied research, economic development, and innovation (links to production and business, including patents).
4. *Politics and policy*: issues about power; autonomy; government; democracy; conflict; struggle; and political parties.
5. *Reform and change*: focuses on topics such as politics and policy; administration and management; modernization; autonomy; and the Córdoba reform of 1918.
6. *Quality assessment and evaluation*: of faculty; institutions; and academic programs; also looks at overall notions of quality (only a small number talk about excellence); testing; performance indicators; accreditation; and international rankings.
7. *Autonomy*: including its relations with students; faculty; power and politics; the State; financing; government; quality assurance; and accreditation.
8. *Social movements and conflict*: in particular student movements; faculty; interaction with the State and government; and unions.
9. *Inequality*: regarding students; access; gender; faculty; on issues of quality; affirmative action; and participation; and the relation between HE and inequality.
10. *Gender*: students; gender studies; faculty; participation; feminism; theory; identity and discourse; careers and trajectories; curriculum; and abuse, harassment and other types of sexual violence on campus.
11. *Government and governance*: includes specific references to power; politics and policy; administration and management; conflict, movements, and protests in HE; university autonomy; and internal democracy.
12. *Student enrollments and access*: social, racial, and gender inequalities among students; scholarships and support services; admission policies and affirmative action; indigenous peoples and multiculturalism.
13. *Multiculturalism and diversity*: indigenous peoples and institutions; students; diversity; language; curriculum; and access.
14. *Internationalization*: student and faculty mobility; student migrations; transnational institutions; cooperation and collaboration; and curriculum.

Concluding Observations

This review of Latin American literature on higher education reveals significant growth and diversification trends. The field of higher education in the region today converges with the main international debates, as well as international mainstream production guidelines and methodologies (see Teichler's (2015) observations about HE in Europe).

This observation, however, has to be qualified. Latin American scholarship maintains a permanent focus on the relations between higher education and science and technology with the region's social, political, and economic problems. This explains the continuing relevance of political and social perspectives about systems and institutions and their actors (Marginson and Ordorika 2011; Ordorika 2003).

The field has been enriched by new studies regarding the quality and pertinence of higher education and scientific research. These include student and faculty evaluation; program accreditation; internationalization; new digital technologies for learning; among others. Different approaches have also emerged toward analyzing government and administration in higher education. Relatively new themes of institutional change; educational innovation; research networks; and science and technology transfers are now being addressed. Finally, research into the social dynamics of higher education has also been improved with the use of innovative socio-economic, gender, race, and cultural inequality perspectives.

In contrast to Brunner's 1988 observations, the field has evolved, acquiring more theoretical, methodological, and thematic plurality and diversity. As new generations of scholars are incorporated into regional universities and research centers, it would be expected that growth and diversity will consolidate, and that new theoretical approaches, methodologies, and themes will further enrich the field of higher education in Latin America.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Anglophonic Countries in Latin America](#)
- ▶ [Autonomy and Accountability in Higher Education, Latin America](#)
- ▶ [Comparative Research, Higher Education, Field of Higher Education Research, Africa](#)
- ▶ [Field of Higher Education Research, Asia](#)
- ▶ [Field of Higher Education Research, China](#)
- ▶ [Field of Higher Education Research, Europe](#)
- ▶ [Field of Higher Education Research, France](#)
- ▶ [Field of Higher Education Research, India](#)
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- ▶ [Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Uruguay](#)
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- ▶ [Historical Perspective](#)
- ▶ [Institutional Research and Themes, Latin America](#)

- ▶ [International Organizations and Latin American Higher Education](#)
- ▶ [Internationalization of Higher Education Studies in Latin America](#)
- ▶ [Internationalization of Higher Education, Latin America](#)
- ▶ [Public Funding, Latin America](#)
- ▶ [Research in Higher Education](#)
- ▶ [Role of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\) in the Field of Higher Education Research](#)
- ▶ [The Latin American University Tradition](#)

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