

Should Higher Education be Open or Closed? ¹

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Since beginning work on a project in the field of open education (which includes “distance” and “continuous” education), I have become increasingly aware of the absurdities that confront people in Mexico who aspire to gain a professional degree and the grotesque enormity of the bureaucratic obstacles that are placed in their path. One gains the impression that the Mexican educational system is designed to *prevent* citizens from having access to a professional degree, if it possibly can, rather than helping them to reach the level required. Moreover, the criteria used to select or reject people at each stage of the process have little to do with academic quality. This is worrying, because it casts doubt on the very essence of an educational system: its guarantee of quality. At the same time, now that open systems of education are taking root in Mexico, comparisons are inevitable between open and traditional education. It is hard not to draw the conclusion that open systems are not only more human and caring in their approach, but also designed to produce better results in terms of quality. Such a situation can only lead to rivalry of competing claims. It is hoped that such competition will result in an overall improved model of higher education. Open education has already taken its lead from traditional education. Now perhaps it is the time for traditional education to learn from open education. Although the power of decision lies with the SEP³, an overreliance on this position of power could cause upheavals and an eventual downthrow of the traditional system. Already open educationalists are looking for ways of bypassing official channels so as to find the freedom that is the basis of their educational philosophy.

What do we need to do to get a degree?

Perhaps we could start by looking at the traditional process of education up to first degree level (or, some would say, “professional” level). What do you need to do to get a *licenciatura*? The following is a description

¹ Based on a plenary address given at the PROULEX Second National Encounter, “Breaking Barriers”, held in Guadalajara, Jalisco, on July 20, 1996. **This is a refereed article.**

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³ Secretaria de Educación Pública: Ministry of Education.

of what you have to do in the public education system in the State of Jalisco.

Well, first it is essential for your parents to register your birth and thus possess a birth certificate, because without that you can't get *anything* done in Mexico. Take the birth certificate and apply for entry to a Primary school. This is not too difficult a process. You will almost certainly need photos--four at least, "*tamaño infantil*". Next you have to go to school for the next six years and hopefully you will learn to read and write; basic mathematics, and a great deal about Mexican history. So you sit in a classroom for about four and a half thousand hours; and with luck you will eventually get your primary school certificate. When last I heard, the statistics were telling us that less than half the children complete primary school. (This is in a country where both primary and secondary schooling are now compulsory: part of Salinas' reforms to make Mexico a first world country.)

So far, so good. Now, you need to go with your birth certificate and your primary certificate (and four photos, of course) and make an application to enter secondary school. This is a bit more formidable, but it can be done. Next you need to sit through secondary school for the next three years, another two thousand, two hundred and fifty hours (more or less). And, if you are extremely dedicated or just extremely lucky, you will receive your secondary certificate.

Now, the hard part begins. You take your birth certificate, your primary certificate and your secondary certificate (plus four more photos) and you run along to make an application to get into prepa. But, by now, there are more people than places available. So they make it into a competition. You need to undergo a medical exam to see if you are a drug addict or are capable of withstanding the extreme boredom of the next two thousand, two hundred and fifty hours in a classroom. They also make you take an aptitude test, designed by somebody in the United States, to see if they can fail you on that. They also need to see how rich or poor your parents are, because if they are very rich, they can send you to a private university. All these complicated facts are fed into a very wise computer and it digests them and spits out the results. Accept or reject. If you are one of the 40% who are lucky, you will have the pleasure of sitting in a classroom for another two thousand, two hundred and fifty hours (more or less). After which time, you may or may not graduate from Prepa.

Let's assume you are successful. You grab your birth certificate, your primary certificate, your secondary certificate and your prepa certificate. Only originals will do, I'm afraid. You need another medical exam and yet another aptitude test (College Board, nothing less), for which incidentally there are special preparation courses available. I'm afraid we also need socio-economic information for the points lottery and a letter to guarantee that you haven't committed any crimes and have behaved well while you were in *Prepa*. And you put all this together into a huge folder together with four more photos, and wheel it along to the *Departamento Escolar*, together with your application form and you hand it all in. Then you wait, usually until after the term has started for the results to come through. Let's assume that you are exceptionally lucky or very bright and you get in. Then be prepared to sit in a classroom for anywhere between three thousand or three thousand, seven hundred and fifty hours (more or less) so that you *might* emerge as a "*pasante*". But wait! That isn't enough. You also need to do 900 hours of social service somewhere in there, virtually unpaid and probably nothing whatever to do with your studies.

But you still haven't got there. Now there is the thesis looming over you like a malignant mountain to be climbed. You suddenly have to become an author and a researcher, and write a book. This will take you anywhere between six months and three years, depending on your ability or on what other distractions or pressures you have. Fortunately, there are professional thesis writers available for rich and dishonest students. And for as little as \$4,000 pesos you can have your thesis done for you. (You will have to read it, of course, before you do your thesis exam.) Now, we seem to be getting somewhere. But no. We still have to present the thesis exam and the professional exam. And then congratulations are in line.

But wait ! What about the process of "*titulación*"? Get out your birth certificate, your primary certificate, your secondary certificate, your prepa certificate (only originals will do, I'm afraid), your "*carta de pasante*", your certificate of social service, your thesis exam certificate and your professional exam certificate. Buy the "*pergamino*" that your degree certificate is to be printed on. Six photos, this time, of two different sizes. You need a letter guaranteeing that you don't owe any money to the university department or campus where you did your studies. You need to hand in two copies of your "*Certificados de Estudios Profesionales*", together with the "*acta*" of your thesis. Oh, and you also need to hand in an *oficio* saying that you have completed your social service. Hand all this in and wait a good,

long time, because this is going to need the signatures of some very important people and they don't have much time to sign papers. So we're talking about a minimum of three months and most probably six months, unless you just happen to be related to some important university official. And maybe you will get your degree certificate.

Now, I'd like to be able to say that this nightmare ended there, but the truth is, if you want to practice your profession, the law of the state says that it is a crime to do so without your "*cédula profesional*". So, I'm afraid there are more processes to be done. This naturally needs all of the documents mentioned above, plus photos, fees paid, etc., etc.

So, you can now legally practice in the State of Jalisco, but if you want to practice your profession elsewhere, you need to do a trip to Mexico City and register your "*título*" with the SEP. This, needless to say, is a very long process and requires an enormous number of documents, quite a lot of money and infinite patience.

An alternative process

This is a bit idealistic, but by no means impossible.

In order to enter a university degree program (*licenciatura*, if you wish), you don't need to produce any documents at all. You just need to attend an interview, and the function of this is not to pass or fail you, but to provide a two-way exchange of information that can result in giving orientation to both parties involved, the student and the university. As a result of this interview, you may decide to continue, but with a clearer idea of what is involved. Additional entry conditions may be required: for some courses of study, you need a good knowledge of mathematics; others need a foreign language; in the case of fine arts, some evidence of talent would be desirable. But there are many courses of study that do not require specialized abilities.

Once you start to study, you receive a detailed description of the program and the requirements to get a degree. You receive your first package of materials and are assigned a tutor. You don't need to sit in a classroom, although you can have face-to-face contact with your tutor, if you wish. You can also meet other students doing your program, if desired, during a short summer program.

There is no timetable to follow. You can do the work when you want and do the modules in any sequence, although you will receive advice that may recommend doing some of them in a certain sequence according to your own circumstances.

You can have access to a library either by visiting it physically, or by taking out articles via computer access from your home. You can also communicate with your tutor by electronic mail or computer conferencing. You can also “hand in” your written work electronically by computer networking. Your tutor can send you feedback by the same medium. You can go on working at your tasks or projects until you have reached a standard that satisfies you personally. When you have completed all the modules in the program, you receive your degree.

And that’s it !

What are the advantages of the latter system I have just described?

First, it is accessible: anyone (people working full-time, housewives, retired people, and even disabled people) can receive a higher education. Second, it is flexible: it can take your personal circumstances into consideration. Third, it is human: it recognizes that we are all different individuals, with different needs and conditions. Fourth, it is positive in orientation: it is designed to help you pass, not to try to fail you if it possibly can. Fifth, it is economical: we don’t need hundreds of secretaries, cleaners and gardeners. Nor do we need building, furniture and equipment maintenance. Finally, it is genuinely educational: it is concerned with academic value and quality, not bureaucratic requirements.

Are there any limitations that we should note?

Certainly ! First, not everyone has the capacity to do a course of higher education. “Capacity” could be defined as a mixture of natural intelligence and personal motivation. In the traditional system, what counts is persistence. This is one of the ingredients of success in higher education, but it is not by any means the only one. Secondly, there has to be vocational orientation: there cannot be an unlimited supply of jobs available for qualified doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants and administrators. There are always limitations in the job market. Any system of public education should take these into consideration (though it seldom does so in fact) lest the policies espoused could be criticised as misuse of public funds.

What are the advantages of the first system I described?

Really, there is only one I can think of: it keeps the unemployment figures down. In the tradition of third world countries, government or public service sectors act as a sponge for a large sector of unemployed (and perhaps in some cases unemployable) members of society. It also absorbs a huge population of school leavers and gives them an occupation: being a student. (We should note, however, that in Mexico most students do a job on the side, if they can find one.)

What are the disadvantages of the traditional system?

It is highly inefficient educationally (there is a vast amount of wastage and too often the standards are low). It is also wasteful of money: large numbers of full-time staff are required just to maintain the buildings, grounds and equipment, not to mention the armies of bureaucrats recruited into administrative areas. There is also insufficient control of quotas for the traditionally “popular” areas of study: medicine, law, accountancy and administration. The system does not serve to validate the academic quality of the studies. Instead, there is a bureaucratic and impersonal system of “requirements” that have to be met for a degree to be awarded. Finally, it has to be said that the system described encourages dishonesty and corruption. Poorly paid bureaucratic officials can make a little extra money by “selling” documents. There is also a brisk trade in forged documents. This happens because, in the final analysis, the documents are what count, not what students learned in the classroom.

Open or “flexible” learning: the Australian experience

In the next section, I wish to present some visions of open or “flexible” learning, as people are now beginning to call it, taken from an address by Richard Johnson (Johnson 1995) of the Centre for Continuing Education at the Australian National University.

First there is the idea of open access:

Flexible learning means open access to educational opportunities, opportunities for learning... It means recognition of prior learning; it means you get credit for what you know, however you acquired the knowledge, whether out of textbooks, or from bringing up children, or from any other activity. The knowledge, the learning is important: not when and where and how it was gained... Many people, for all sorts of reasons, did not have the opportunity to finish high school and qualify for normal admission to further study. Open access gives these peo-

ple a chance to commence such study, to give it a go. If they then don't succeed, OK; but they're not cut off from the start.

Education can be adjusted to our individual needs:

It is part of democratic society to be able to enjoy life just the way we want it, within the limits of our budget and of orderly behaviour. To be able to learn what we want, when and where and how we want to learn, is simply an extension of that democratic idea.

Open education costs less:

Open learning can also be very cost effective. If people can study wherever they wish, there is less need for large campuses, elaborate buildings, furniture, heating, lighting, cleaning, maintenance. A set of learning materials developed at high cost can be used by thousands of students instead of the hundreds that can be accommodated in a traditional unit of study. For the student, there is less time committed to travel.

Changes in attitude are necessary:

People in education need to be brought to the point of view that the most important thing is to encourage learning and the learner. Whatever contributes to that is good. The emphasis then moves off "teaching" and onto "learning". For a lot of teachers, at all levels, that is a Copernican shift; they are not the centre of the universe: their students are...

The next attitude to encourage is that there is a wide range of technologies available to assist learning; that it is the teacher's responsibility to know what they are and how they can be applied, and where they should be applied, and when not... We need to beware on the one hand of the Luddites, who do not want to know about technology and its powers, and on the other hand the technofreaks who think that if it's not delivered electronically it can't be any good. These are the attitudes which need to be fostered in teachers: that the learner, not the teacher, is the centre of the enterprise; and that technology is a wonderful servant, but not the master of the enterprise...

There is also an attitude to be fostered among administrators and executives: that educational institutions and organizational structures exist for the sake of the students: the students are not there to meet the convenience of the institution.

Can education in Mexico become open and flexible?

The answer to this question is that it is already happening, whether the authorities like it or not. Official attitudes are, however, very slow to change. Open education is seen as a threat to traditional methods of admin-

istrative control. How, for example, can you budget for and control an academic's time when she or he is no longer working fixed hours in the university office or classroom, but is doing the work from the home computer terminal? How can we measure academic quality, when quantitative measures of the hours of face-to-face instruction can no longer be used as an index?

Nevertheless, the authorities are gradually coming round to the position that if they don't accept open learning, with all its revolutionary implications, they will lose control of the situation altogether. Open university systems are already forming consortia with foreign open systems to validate their degrees. The SEP will have to choose between grudging recognition or outright warfare. And the sheer scale of the open education movement internationally is overwhelming. Open educators are joining forces to mount a relentless campaign for what they see as denial of access to education - a civil right.

We already have in Mexico examples of good and bad open education. The best versions are those that genuinely embrace the philosophy of open education: the worst are those that think it is possible to do the job cheaply and on an industrial scale, so as to meet popular demand. There is little point in having open education in the fields of medicine, accountancy, law and administration, until the universities reduce their intake in these fields drastically and offer effective educational orientation to all prospective candidates. For example, the University of Guadalajara should cut its intake of law students by half in the metropolitan area; and increase its intake in rural areas. (I say that with great confidence, but if I were to propose such a reform, there would be a general shrugging of shoulders, meaning that "we cannot argue with politics".) Distance systems can help in the question of rural education away from the concentrations of human and library resources. Also prospective students should be headed off from these saturated areas if it becomes clear that they have no real vocational drive other than a vague desire to be "successful in life". Most important of all, open education is concerned with *quality* rather than *quantity*: it is important to make sure that this quality is achieved.

Only time will tell whether open education will prosper in Mexico, but the indications are that it will not only flourish, but begin to exercise an influence on traditional approaches to education--to the benefit of the latter.

References

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