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EMERGING ISSUES, HIGHER EDUCATION AND NETWORKS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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The first decade of the XXI Century has not concluded yet, and the globalized world is already facing its first economic crisis that is also of great dimensions. A first global crisis that also has put for discussion the review of one of the paradigms that have been in force during the last decades: the role of the market as the big leader of the society, the promoter of development and the distributor of wealth.



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The incapacity of the governments (especially in the Latin America and the Caribbean) to fully satisfy the juvenile demand for higher education, as well as the decrease of resources devoted to this activity, and a supposed degradation on the quality of public education, were the breeding ground for the flourishing of private institutions of higher education, where the principle of profitability was the main reason for the creation of such institutions.



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“(...) the Latin American university has been pressed by a higher demand of productivity and quality (understood only with an exclusive business vision: efficiency and effectiveness), without taking into account equity and social and academic relevance in their teaching and researching functions, especially in the field of applied sciences, and to make closer its relation with the private enterprise that, in other words, can be described as an unavoidable financial dependence. As a consequence of this, it is worrying to see the trend that each time the university is giving more ground in one of its basic tasks: the ethical-critical reflection about the production of knowledge and its social application, that is to say, its academic autonomy”.

--Carlos Tünnermann



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While UNESCO and its filial bodies declared education as a public good, the World Bank (1998-1999) proposed to convert the public research institutions in commercial societies. Under the same ideology and with a similar procedure, in 2002 the World Trade Organization (WTO) adopted the resolution to include education as a commercial service subject to the rules of the General Agreement on trade and Tariffs (GATT).



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The University will have to take the necessary steps to figure out a new scenario where financing should be fully accepted as an obligation of the State –that is to say the national governments- and the evaluation criteria should respond to academic parameters.

It will be necessary to review all the structures that support the present systems of institutional evaluation and imagine some other alternatives, more coherent with the exercise of the university autonomy, and more compatible with a globalized society.



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What remains to be seen is what will be the political, cultural, and even ideological repercussions, but above all, how they will be expressed in the sphere of education and what will be the reaction of the different governments, of the education institutions, of the academic staff and the students.

The more risky weakness is that the worries and discussions still are not enough widespread among the university community, nor among all other sectors, especially the students.



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The institutional networks should be the support of the information, the diffusion and of the reflection about the changes that the Latin American and Caribbean education need.

Grow up, spread out, cover more, and have a greater interaction, must be the guidelines that the institutional networks must not lose sight of.

We state with full certainty that our organizations may become the real launching pad for ideas, plans, programs, and politics to move forward and contribute to the design of a better future for our societies.



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