

Book Review

Diversity as a Value of Chilean Higher Education

Julio Roberto Labraña Vargas

Universität Witten/Herdecke, Witten, Germany

Andrés Bernasconi (Ed.). (2014). **La educación superior de Chile: transformación, desarrollo y crisis**. Santiago, Chile: Ediciones UC, Colección de Estudios CEPPE-UC, 632 pages.

Reforms are currently being discussed which will certainly influence the future of Chilean higher education institutions. Within this context this book, edited by Andrés Bernasconi, an academic from the Faculty of Education at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, obtains a major importance. Given that the debate about the purpose of higher education in Chile tends to evolve through public exposure of private interests, a well-founded approach, presented in this book, is more than necessary today.

Bernasconi indicates in his introduction that this book presents the responses of Chilean higher education institutions to the transformations of recent decades. In this regard, this volume joins the list of fundamental texts to understand the contemporary trajectory of Chilean higher education, along with other general studies, such as *The transformations of education under the military regime*, (Programa Interdisciplinario de Investigación en Educación [PIIE], 1991); *Report on higher education in Chile* (Brunner, 1986); *Report on higher education in Chile: 1980-2003* (Bernasconi & Rojas, 2004); *Guiding the market: A report on higher education in Chile* (Brunner et al., 2005); *Reform of higher education* (Brunner & Peña, 2008); and, *The conflict of universities: Between public and private* (Brunner y Peña, 2011), among others.

Post to:

Julio Roberto Labraña Vargas
Universität Witten/Herdecke
Alfred-Herrhausen-Straße 50, 58448 Witten
E-mail: jlabrana@ug.uchile.cl

© 2016 PEL, <http://www.pensamientoeducativo.org> - <http://www.pel.cl>

ISSN: 0719-0409 DDI: 203.262, Santiago, Chile
doi: 10.7764/PEL.53.1.2016.24

The book gathers thirteen unpublished essays written by national distinguished academics on the different dimensions of Chilean higher education, with an emphasis on universities. It is divided into two sections: «structure» and «functions». The first one addresses the history of the institutions, its legal framework, funding, government, quality assurance and teaching staff. The second one is focused on teaching, research, internationalization, management, access and admission. Each chapter is independent.

The reflection on the structure of higher education begins with Brunner's essay, «Half a century of transformations in Chilean higher education: A state of art» (Chapter I). The author creates a panoramic view of the evolution of higher education during the last fifty years. His theoretical interpretation of the changes in Chilean higher education from 1964 to 2014 —according to its origin (internal or external) and the radical nature of the change (incremental, or in terms of trajectory)— is especially interesting in a discipline that tends to overvalue statistical revision (Ball, 1995).

The following chapters address the different regulatory mechanisms in higher education. In «Legal framework and regulation: Higher education as a fundamental social right» (Chapter II) León analyzes the different legal conceptualizations in higher education and the consequences of these interpretations, together with freedom of teaching. Fernández, in turn, describes the evolution of higher education policies in detail in «Public policy in higher education from 1990 until the present». His analysis demonstrates how policies begin with attempts at wide-scale changes, then continue with the use of funding as a policy instrument and, after the student movement in 2011, they return to seeking general changes to the higher education system. Later, in «The challenges of the experience of funding higher education in Chile» (Chapter IV), Paredes analyzes the funding of Chilean higher education from a comparative perspective and evaluates these policies in terms of inclusion and quality.

In his chapter «The government of institutions» Bernasconi discusses the different forms of institutional government. Here, it is particularly remarkable that in both state and private Chilean universities, autonomy is understood as an end in itself and not as an instrument of social service; an issue which is reviewed in other analyses (Bernasconi, 2014; Brunner 2005). The effects of this orientation become evident in the study by Lemaitre, «Quality assurance: A policy and its circumstances» (Chapter VI). In a context of autonomy, it does not seem coincidental that one of the most urgent challenges is to determine a definition of the quality of institutions and programs, as his analysis of quality assurance processes in higher education suggests.

The analysis of the structure of higher education finishes with the study by Berríos: «The academic profession in Chile: Growth and professionalization» (Chapter VII). The growing complexity of Chilean academia, visible in the number of indexed journal publications and teachers with full-time contracts and doctorate degrees, seems to go hand-in-hand with a proliferation of different types of degree programs being developed by teaching staff in the university sector.

The section on functions begins with the traditional work of Latin American institutions: teaching (Bernasconi 2008, Levy 1986). González's chapter, «Perspectives and challenges of teaching in Chilean higher education», describes how in universities, the priority is given to the assignment of the responsibility for results to students, which is perhaps a surprising issue, considering that these institutions specialize in the professional education. Next, the author reviews the main governmental and institutional initiatives to improve teaching, and considering this panorama, he suggests more research on student learning and the use of these studies as a basis for improvement actions.

In the following chapter, «University scientific research in Chile», Santelices focuses on scientific research at Chilean universities and the public policies designed to promote it. As in the rest of the world, his data points to the consolidation of a limited number of research institutions in which the production of articles, doctoral education and patent creation is concentrated. These institutions represent a minority in the national context of teaching universities, which is also the case for Latin America (Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe [IESALC], 2006).

This thesis on the exceptional nature of research and its repercussions in terms of insertion into the international scientific context is complemented by Matus' analysis in «Discourses on internationalization as a form of rethinking university». The author addresses the processes of the internationalization of Chilean universities and highlights the need to consider culture as a relevant variable. The author suggests that otherwise it would be possible to fall into the uncritical adoption of a neo-liberal, global project.

The analysis conducted by Pedraja-Rejas and Rodríguez-Ponce in «Strategic direction and management in institutions of higher education» (Chapter IX) addresses the dilemmas of strategic direction and the management of higher education institutions. Aside from exceptions—such as the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile from the traditional universities, the Universidad de Talca (University of Talca) from the state ones and Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez (Adolfo Ibáñez University) from the private universities—the authors suggest that Chilean institutions are not accustomed to using the knowledge gained in the administrative sciences as a guide.

Next, in «Equity in the higher education system in Chile: Access, retention, performance, and outcomes» (Chapter XII), Espinoza and González analyze whether institutions of higher education comply with this principle. For this purpose, they propose a concept of equity involving two axes of analysis: on one hand, concepts of equality and equity in its different dimensions; and on the other hand, resources (financial, social, and cultural) and the different phases of the educational process (access, retention, performance, and outcomes). The intersection of these variables creates three objectives that should be met by policy: *equity for equal needs, equity for equal abilities, and equity for equal achievement*. The authors evaluate how far these ends are being achieved and suggest measures for improvement.

Finally, Santelices, Galleguillos, and Catalán describe the systems of transition between secondary and university education in «Access and transition to university in Chile» (Chapter XIII). With this purpose, the authors study the indicators used in the admission processes to universities, part of the Rectors Council of Chilean Universities (Consejo de Rectores de las Universidades Chilenas [CRUCH]), available information, plans for standardization within institutions and suggestions from international evidence.

Challenges for research, public policy design and criticism

One of the most interesting aspects of the analyses that form this book is its ability to establish fruitful dialogue between research, policy design and criticism. In this sense, the book not only presents the main indicators of higher education, but also evaluates the operational budgets of these public policies. This is the case for key aspects of the public discussion, such as free university education, the provisional administrator bill, the criteria used to measure the quality of institutions, the government and the university administration, among others.

In my opinion, this positioning, and its alignment with other observers of the higher education system, sheds an interesting light on the current evolution of these institutions. In this respect, we can follow Bernasconi's comments when explaining the title of the book. Chilean higher education, as opposed to higher education in Chile, allows to highlight the relationship between society and higher education; that is, its «path-dependent» nature with respect to previous decisions.

It is possible to extend this principle—the historicity of Chilean higher education—to the same essays that form the book. If we accept that the observation of society is a process which has a place in society (Baecker, 2014, Luhmann, 1990), then this can give us clues about the current aspects of the system. The topics on which research on higher education is focused are not independent of its evolution, and consequently change according to the transformations in the system. In this way, as descriptions of Chilean higher education, the reflections made by the different authors of the book «Chilean higher education: Transformation, development and crisis», are also representative of a historic moment reached by the system.

In this sense, if there is something that appears across the analysis of the different authors, it is their understanding of diversity in Chilean higher education. This is expressed in different ways: in the study of the purposes of each organization, in the option not to extend the characteristics of one sector to all sectors, in the preference for descriptions of institutions rather than of a homogenous system, etc. A highly diversified higher education system, as is the Chilean case, does not have either the highest point, or representative base of all organizations.

Of course, this same institutional diversity should also correspond with the observation platforms of higher education institutions. In a relatively isomorphic context, before the structural reforms of the

1980s, the observation of the institutions as a group does not vary significantly. In contrast, in a highly diversified environment, each of the descriptions should be placed against other alternatives. The system then becomes polycontextural, that is to say, characterized by the absence of a common perspective between all institutions.

One of the consequences of this phenomenon is that scientific descriptions no longer have a superior status as system descriptors. They are in contrast with equally against other definitions of the situation, such as those created by the student movement, economic agents, political parties, university representatives, etc. The pedagogical *establishment*—the term used to describe the evaluative roles of education (Labraña, 2014; Luhmann y Schorr, 1996, 2000)— is becoming more diverse.

Thus, research becomes one of its own objects of study: it analyses the diversity of institutions from a particular position. In a context such as that described, however, observational platforms with reflexive characteristics can also emerge, which recognize their «situated nature» and do not generalize their description as if it were the only alternative. In a strict sense, they do justice to the complexity of society.

The participants of this book are a clear example of this form of observation. They analyze the structure and functions of the system, addressing its diversity without extending their visions to a normative level, as usual in the reformist debate (Ball, 1995). On the contrary, the majority of the criticism points precisely to the risks of generalization of one mode of government (Bernasconi in «The government of institutions») or of one research model as a norm (Santelices in «University-level scientific research in Chile»), or the expansion of one legal principle above all others (León in «Legal framework and regulation: Higher education as a fundamental social right»), etc.

This aspect is key. Unfortunately, the system does not become more transparent or controllable with it (Baecker, 2015). However, it does acquire a greater reflexiveness and awareness of the partiality of all understanding to the system as a whole. In a context in which the public sphere tends to be replaced by publicity from private interests (Habermas, 1974), a book like this which bases its understanding on respect for diversity is necessary. As a result, it is suggested reading not only for academics, public policy specialists and institutional directors, but also to all those who are interested, for one reason or another, in the future of higher education in Chile.

References

- Baecker, D. (2014). *Complex systems in social theory*. Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2512647> o <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2512647>
- Baecker, D. (2015). *Postheroische Führung: Vom Rechnen mit Komplexität*. Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler.
- Ball, S. J. (1995). Intellectuals or technicians? The urgent role of theory in educational studies. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 43(3), 255-271. doi: 10.2307/3121983
- Bernasconi, A. (2008). Is there a Latin American model of the university? *Comparative Education Review*, 52(1), 27-52. doi: 10.1086/524305
- Bernasconi, A. (2014). Autonomía universitaria en el siglo XXI: nuevas formas de legitimidad ante las transformaciones del Estado y la sociedad. *Páginas de Educación*, 7(2), 33-60.
- Bernasconi, A., & Rojas, F. (2004). *Informe sobre la educación superior en Chile: 1980-2003*. Santiago, Chile: Editorial Universitaria.
- Brunner, J. J. (1986). *Informe sobre la educación superior en Chile*. Santiago, Chile: FLACSO.
- Brunner, J. J. (2005). Transformaciones de la universidad pública. *Revista de Sociología*, 19, 31-49. doi: 10.5354/0719-529X.2005.27812
- Brunner, J. J., Elacqua, G., Tillett, A., Bonnefoy, J., González, S., Pacheco, P., & Salazar, F. (2005). *Guiar el mercado. Informe sobre la educación superior en Chile*. Santiago, Chile: Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez.
- Brunner, J. J., & Peña, C. (Eds.). (2008). *Reforma de la educación superior*. Santiago, Chile: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales.
- Brunner, J. J., & Peña, C. (Eds.). (2011). *El conflicto de las universidades: entre lo público y lo privado*. Santiago, Chile: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales.
- Habermas, J. (1974). The public sphere: an encyclopedia article (1964). *New German Critique*, 3, 49-55. doi: 10.2307/487737
- Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe (IESALC) (2006). *Informe sobre la educación superior en América Latina y el Caribe 2000-2005. La metamorfosis de la educación superior*. Caracas: Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura.
- Labraña, J. J. (2014). El establishment pedagógico: aprontes teóricos desde una perspectiva organizacional. In M. Arnold, H. Cadenas, & A. Urquiza (Eds.), *La organización de las organizaciones sociales: aplicaciones desde perspectivas sistémicas* (pp. 451-469). Santiago, Chile: RIL Editores.
- Levy, D. (1986). *Higher education and the State in Latin America. Private challenges to public dominance*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Luhmann, N. (1990). Ich sehe was, was Du nicht siehst. In N. Luhmann (Ed.), *Soziologische Aufklärung 5. Konstruktivistische Perspektiven* (pp. 228-234). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Luhmann, N., & Schorr, K. -E. (1996). *El déficit tecnológico de la educación y la pedagogía*. In N. Luhmann (Ed.), *Teoría de la sociedad y pedagogía* (pp. 63-91). Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica.
- Luhmann, N., & Schorr, K. -E. (2000). *Problems of reflection in the system of education*. Neuwirth, Münster and New York: Waxmann.
- Programa Interdisciplinario de Investigación en Educación (PIIE) (1991). *Las Transformaciones de la educación bajo el régimen militar*. Santiago, Chile: Programa Interdisciplinario de Investigación en Educación.

