

Abstract

Significant resistance to private universities in Argentina has resulted in a small, but strong participation of this sector in higher education. Core debates about private actors in education have evolved from vigorous opposition to more nuanced discussion about their fundamental role. However, the more prestigious and larger public sector still enjoys much governmental support in terms of finance and regulations, which has led the private sector to rely mostly on tuition revenue.

Argentina's Private Universities: Stringent Regulation of a Small but Consolidated Sector

Dante J. Salto

Private sector provision of higher education in Argentina has met much more resistance at the university level than at any other level of the educational system. Argentina's binary higher education system includes 2,369 university and nonuniversity institutions that enroll almost three million students. The private sector enrolls one out of four students in higher education, but only one out of five students at universities. Private institutions tend to be smaller than their public peers, as the number of private universities represents approximately half of the total. Nonuniversity-level institutions offer teacher education and technical and vocational educational programs. Universities offer a wide range of degrees from undergraduate to graduate education. By and large, the provision of private university education has been at the epicenter of the debates.

The core debates surrounding university education provision focus on the role, function, and quality of the private and public sectors. Those arguing against private participation stress that higher education is a public good. According to this viewpoint, public provision should be a priority, and private providers should be stringently regulated and minimally funded. Instead, those supporting private participation claim that the private sector fulfills a public mission, and, as such, deserves government funding and equivalent regulation. Also, they stress that the public sector faces quality and efficiency issues.

Debates over the Freedom to Educate

Argentina's higher education system dates back to its colonial times. Through the Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown's approval, the Jesuits created the antecedent of the first university in its current territory back in 1613. The Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, as it is known nowadays, was provincialized and nationalized—switched to full public ownership—in 1820 and 1856, respectively. The public sector at the university level remained a monopoly until the mid-twentieth century in Argentina. Only in 1958, more than a century after its independence, did Argentina legally allow private university providers.

As also happened in other Latin American countries, the first wave of private universities in Argentina responded to the Catholic Church's longstanding demands. During the ban against private universities, those who defended the status quo argued that the state should be the only university education provider. On the other side, those who opposed the ban claimed that the constitution recognized their right to provide education.

Even If Allowed, Public Funding Is Restricted

The arguments, however, went beyond the right to provide education. The late establishment of private universities in Argentina reflects discussions regarding the public purpose of private universities. Private sector advocates emphasize that the sector fulfills a public mission as much as the rest of the system. Those opposing private involvement claim that the private sector should not receive public support as they only contribute in a limited way to society. As a result of those debates, private universities in Argentina cannot receive direct or indirect public funding, except for research. The private sector therefore relies vastly on tuition fees charged to students, in sharp contrast to its public counterpart, which is fully funded by the national and provincial governments.

The clear-cut contrast between funding of public and private universities differentiates Argentina from some of its neighbors. Brazil and Chile provide public financing for both private and public higher education sectors. These differing policy choices may

signal that some countries do consider that the private sector fulfills a public purpose, while public funding in Argentina exclusively targets public universities.

Public or Government Mistrust of Private Higher Education?

The massification and diversification of higher education, both private and public, have increased quality concerns. Those opposing the introduction of private actors in higher education prescribe further regulation of the private sector through quality assurance mechanisms. Nonstate actors, however, point out that quality concerns are not exclusive to the private sector. In fact, a few private universities in Argentina are fairly prestigious, notwithstanding the public sector's domination. Yet, the regulation set up to oversee new universities reflects some bias against nonstate actors. Created in 1995, the accreditation agency sets extra regulatory hurdles to establish new private universities. Private providers need approval from the agency before their formal creation, whereas public universities go through the review after congress has created them without much room for dissent. Although some may claim that this regulatory differential is unfair, in practice, these extra barriers to create new private universities have legitimized them and have kept the number of low-quality, demand-absorbing, and "predatory" institutions very limited in Argentina.

Private providers' survival in such stringent conditions (e.g., stricter regulations, free-tuition competition) could be explained by their capacity to offer something different than their public peers (e.g., small class sizes, flexible hours, distance education). Notably, the dominant and prestigious free-tuition, free-access public sector has accumulated perceived failures that have led to a flight from upper-class and middle-class students to their private peers.

A Small but Consolidated Sector

The arguments regarding nonstate actors' participation in higher education in Argentina have moved from explicit opposition to more nuanced discussions about their role as a consolidated part of the postsecondary education system. In spite of the limitations and restrictions that nonstate actors face in Argentina, they represent a sizable number of institutions and enroll a small, albeit stable, percentage of students. However, the COVID-19 pandemic poses a significant challenge to a sector that heavily relies on tuition fees. The pandemic effects, coupled with more stringent regulations and a lack of public funding, make it unlikely that this sector will become more prominent in size in the future. ▲

The massification and diversification of higher education, both private and public, have increased quality concerns.

Dante J. Salto is assistant professor of higher education at the Department of Administrative Leadership, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and associate of the Program for Research on Private Higher Education (PROPHE), US. Email: salto@uwm.edu.