

# WORLD education NEWS & REVIEWS

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## TRENDS

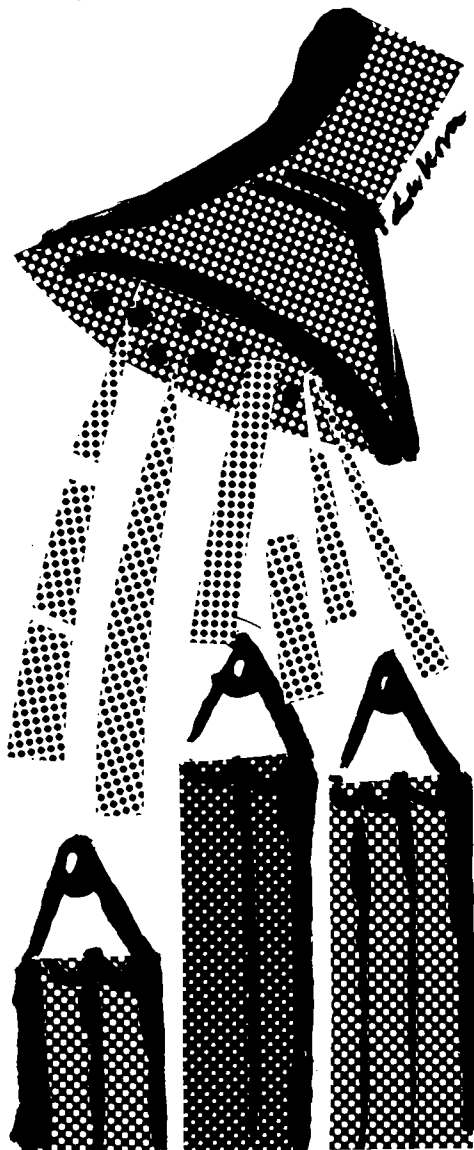
### Update on Mexico

by Alan Adelman

Until a year and a half ago, many Mexican families had finally become convinced that after years of sacrifice, the country was about to make good on promises for a better life. The stores were full of products unseen in Mexico and which they would soon be able to afford. Unprecedented numbers of international companies were coming to Mexico and good employment opportunities were rapidly increasing.

These hopes were dashed when the peso devalued. The cold statistics are that: 15 of each 100 working Mexicans receive less than the daily minimum wage of approximately US\$3.00; 68 of each 100 workers receive incomes between US\$3.00 and \$15.00 daily. These two levels account for 83 percent of workers. And if one thinks there is a solid middle class among the remaining 17 percent of workers, consider the impact of the 32 percent rise in the minimum wage last year against the 61 percent increase in "basic" goods and services. According to the newspaper *Mexico City Reforma*, the privileged workers in Mexico with

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five times the minimum wage must earmark about 50 percent of income for food (an average family of five persons), 33 percent of income for housing, electricity, and other domestic necessities; and 15 percent for round-trip transportation via bus and metro. That leaves two percent for the luxuries of life.

#### Education

In education, there is some reason for optimism about further progress, given that President Ernesto Zedillo, who was educated in the public school system as a working class youth, repeatedly lists education as his administration's top priority. It was none other than Zedillo, who, as education secretary in 1993, oversaw the educational reforms that extended from six to nine (through the completion of junior high school) the years of obligatory school attendance. For these reasons, there are many in Mexico who still hold out hope that Zedillo will succeed where past presidents have failed.

But the challenge ahead is considerable. Owing to a baby boom which has doubled the population every generation, the Mexican education system mirrors the Mexican economy in forming a pyramid with a wide base and a narrow apex. *Continued on page 20*

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## Update on Mexico

Whereas Mexico has nearly achieved universal enrollment at the primary level, the country's secondary level enrollment of 53 percent lags well behind the U.S. and Canada (both over 95 percent). Enrollment figures show that in 1995, more than 21 million registered for the first through 12th grades: 14.5 million children in primary school, 4.5 million in junior high, and two million in senior high. Another 1.3 million were enrolled in universities.

Of students who begin primary school, only 60 percent graduate, only 53 percent continue on to secondary school, and only 30 percent continue on to senior high school or vocational programs. Less than one out of every ten students who begin primary school continues to higher education.

Clearly, in order to improve upon these low levels of educational coverage and continuity, Mexico needs to invest increasingly greater amounts of resources in education. Yet, given the state of the Mexican economy, such amounts are not available, in the short-term, at least. Moreover, within the amounts that are available for public expenditure, Mexico needs to give a much higher priority to education. Until the 1993 educational reforms, the government spent less than three percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education. Although the proportion of GDP spent on education in Mexico has subsequently risen to 5.3 percent, it is still low compared to the seven percent spent in the U.S. and the 7.4 percent in Canada.

Among the most critical challenges facing Mexico are high levels of adult illiteracy and the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous groups. While across Mexico an average of 9.6 percent of all men and 15 percent of women are illiterate, the proportion of

indigenous males who cannot read or write Spanish is almost 30 percent, with that figure rising to more than 51 percent for indigenous women. More than two million Mexican children between six and 14 years old are not attending schools at all—13.3 percent.

### Public Higher Education

Higher education institutions in Mexico can be divided according to legal status, scope, and size of fields of study into four broad subsystems: public universities, regional technological institutes, private institutions and teacher's colleges. There are approximately 750 education institutions in Mexico, of which five percent are public universities, 12 percent are technological institutes, 63 percent are teacher's colleges, and 20 percent are private institutions.

In terms of student enrollments, numbers of teaching personnel, and financial resources, the public universities comprise the most important subsystem of Mexican higher education. This subsystem includes 34 state universities, the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), the three campuses of the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM), and several specialized schools.

Throughout the decades of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, many public universities in Mexico have been in a permanent strife characterized by an increasingly constrained financial environment, student revolts, labor and academic union activism within the universities, the influence of political parties on university administration, and rectors' attempts to capture public resources by expanding enrollments. To avoid more confrontation, the government response to these issues was to allow low (or symbolic) fees, open admissions policies, faculty appointments based on political activism rather than on the basis of scholarly or professional merit, automatic promotion, and continually higher student enrollments.

In the 1990s, a Mexican government increasingly limited by budget restrictions and eager to reorder traditional thinking about university massification, began to put pressure on public universities to raise academic standards. However, despite this recent change in direction, the results of policies from the previous three decades are still very much in evidence throughout Mexican public higher education.

A case in point is in UNAM, the nation's largest university, which has been the focus of student strikes since the 1960s. UNAM has not raised its tuition for nearly half a century, even when the peso has been devalued more than 2,000 percent in that time span. It now costs a mere 20 centavos for a year's tuition at UNAM and the university administration has been stopped by protests each time it has tried to raise tuition fees. UNAM has also seen an expansion in its enrollments to a current total of 270,000 at all levels, including its affiliated high school system. Even so, demand for admission has overwhelmed the university's capacity. Of 152,000 applicants for this year's freshman class, about 112,000 were rejected. Given that some 32,000 graduates from UNAM's high school system received an "automatic pass" to UNAM, that left the remainder of applicants competing for about 8,000 places. Many of these students who were not accepted formed what they call "the Movement of the Excluded" and took over the university's main administration building for several weeks. Some Mexican educators have predicted that, if improvements are not instituted soon, by the end of the decade more than two million college-age students in Mexico will have no opportunity to attend a university.

Other problems facing Mexican public higher education were recently highlighted in a two-year study by an education committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). According to the OECD report, the main structural problems affecting the public system in Mexico

include: (1) inefficiency—public resources in higher education are not well used, dropout rates are high, there is a mismatch between the country's human resource development needs and the perception of bachelor's and master's degree programs as the only models for success, the overwhelming complexity of degree programs with more than 300 bachelor degrees and 700 master's degrees contributed to program duplication; (2) quality—rapid enrollment growth under conditions of limited resources has contributed to lower quality; (3) equity—social and geographic inequality is perpetuated by a lack of a unified higher education system throughout all parts of Mexico, leaving the most prestigious institutions in Mexico City. The report emphasized that although these difficulties were not particular to Mexico, the economic pressures and serious infrastructure problems coupled with explosive growth of students make the situation particularly challenging. Some of the committee's recommendations are: prioritize technological training and research; link higher education more closely with the productive sector; link government funding closely to performance; introduce job-training and trial work periods into the standard curriculum; develop more tutorial systems and orientation for vocational and professional programs; recruit mentors from businesses to aid students; amplify the scholarship system; and develop statistics about the social origins of students.

## Research and Development

Despite the Mexican government's calls for greater cooperation in technological research and development between industry and higher education, the country continues to be hampered by the lack of funding to carry out scientific research. In 1994, Mexico dedicated .46 percent of the GDP to scientific research and development compared to .8 percent for Chile, 2 percent for the European Union and

2.9 percent for the US. Moreover, while private investment in the US, Germany, and Japan constitute 51 percent, 63 percent and 73 percent respectively of total national investment in the sciences, Mexican industry only contributed 9.3 percent of the national total in 1993. Partnerships are formed for many reasons, but certainly chief among them has to be commonality of interest and perception of mutual gain. To a great extent, Mexican public higher education and industry have yet to bridge the chasm between their different viewpoints and cultures.

## Private Higher Education

The distinction between private and public higher education is more marked in Mexico than it is in the United States, where appropriation of public funding to private colleges and universities, capital fund campaigns by public institutions, and government regulations for both segments blur the lines of differentiation. In Mexico, public universities are almost exclusively financed by subsidies from state and federal governments, whereas private universities are almost completely funded by private sources. For many private universities, this self-reliance has had the effect of stimulating innovation and reducing the impact of the current economic crisis (and its corresponding reduction of public expenditure on education) on their programs. Although it is not clear at the moment how successful many of the small private universities will be in riding out the current recession (many have suffered severe enrollment reductions), most of the larger and more well-established institutions are attracting sufficient enrollments and private sector backing to operate their programs.

## Students Flows to the US

The good news is that according to the latest *Open Doors 1994-95*, the number of Mexican students enrolled in US colleges and universities has reached its all-time high, 9,003, and the country now ranks in 11th place as a

sender of international students to the US. The not-so-good news is that the *Open Doors* census was taken before the December 1994 peso devaluation began to have a dampening effect on the ability of many Mexican students to go abroad. For example, one result of the devaluation has been that the Mexican Council on Science and Technology, CONACYT, an agency which by 1995 was funding approximately half of the 2,800 Mexican graduate students in the US and over 2,500 scientists and scholars worldwide, has had to revamp its overseas fellowship plans in order to reflect new economic realities.

Another result has been that the upper middle high school graduates in Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara, who in the previous year would have decided to pursue an undergraduate degree in the US, are deciding to stay close to home, at least until their personal and family economic situations improve. These trends are reflected in the declining of TOEFL volumes from 1994-95 to 1995-96.

The impact of the peso-dollar exchange rate devaluation is also most pronounced on those Mexican students who are completing their studies in the US and contemplating their return to Mexico. The devaluation has radically altered financial activity in Mexico and the short-term prospects for economic growth. The contraction in the number of employment opportunities, combined with depressed wages, will continue to exacerbate, in the short-term at least, Mexico's brain drain problems.

One can only hope that these setbacks are only temporary, that Mexican enrollments in the US will resume their recent steady rates of increase, which have averaged approximately ten percent a year since the beginning of the decade, and that employment prospects will improve enough to sustain the Mexican government's generous support for the development of Mexican human resources at universities both inside and outside of Mexico.