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**Hubert B. Van Hoof^{1,2}, Mateo Estrella²,
Marie-Isabel Eljuri², and Leonardo Torres León²**

Abstract

Ecuador's higher education system is undergoing dramatic changes. The National Constitution of 2008 and the Higher Education Law of 2010 have changed the way Ecuador's universities are funded, administered, and accredited. The importance of research was elevated and drastic changes were made to the academic qualifications and employment conditions of full-time faculty. This article describes the attempt to raise the level of Ecuador's system of higher education and its impact on faculty and administrators.

Resumen

El sistema de educación superior de Ecuador está teniendo cambios dramáticos. La Constitución Nacional del 2008 y la Ley de Educación Superior del 2010 han cambiado la forma en que las universidades ecuatorianas se fondean, administran y acreditan. La importancia de la investigación se elevó y cambios drásticos fueron hechos a los grados académicos y condiciones de empleo de profesores de tiempo completo. Este manuscrito describe el esfuerzo de elevar el nivel del sistema ecuatoriano de educación superior y su impacto en profesores y administradores.

Keywords

Ecuador, Ecuador higher education, Ecuador Constitution 2008, Ecuador Higher Education Law 2010, Rafael Correa

Recent, far-reaching developments in Ecuador's political landscape have had a dramatic impact on higher education in the country. These changes have not only impacted

¹Penn State School of Hospitality Management, University Park, PA, USA

²University of Cuenca, Cuenca, Ecuador

Corresponding Author:

Hubert B. Van Hoof, Facultad de Ciencias de la Hospitalidad, University of Cuenca, Cuenca, Ecuador.

Email: hbv1@psu.edu

the way in which higher education and the country's public and private universities are funded and governed but have also significantly affected the lives and careers of university administrators, faculty, and students and have started to change the role of the university in Ecuador's society.

In late 2006, Rafael Correa was elected President of Ecuador. Riding a wave of popular acclaim, he succeeded in getting a new National Constitution adopted in 2008. In this new Constitution it was determined that public education, from the lowest to the highest levels, would be free to Ecuadorian citizens. This changed the funding and administrative structures of Ecuador's public universities from tuition-based and relatively autonomous to complete dependency on the central government with regard to budget allocations, student admissions, and administration.

A second major development impacting higher education was the adoption of the Higher Education Law in August 2010. This law sought to increase the regulation of the country's universities even further by increasing their accountability to the central government and by bringing their research and educational efforts more in line with the country's social and economic development needs. It created three national institutions to oversee the country's institutions of higher education, approve new degree programs, regulate student admissions, distribute state appropriations to public universities, stimulate research activity, and accredit existing academic programs and universities.

Mr. Correa's government is seeking enhancement of educational opportunities for underserved population groups, higher accountability for the country's universities, and a more active role for Ecuador's universities in the economic and social development of the country and its citizens. University administrators and faculty are concerned about the loss of self-governance of the universities, about the fact that the administrative and fiscal infrastructures presently in place cannot deal with the new demands, and with the negative effect these changes have had on the rights of individual faculty members.

This article discusses the impact these political changes have had on Ecuador's system of higher education. Besides the above-mentioned changes, new legislation has also brought about changes in faculty employment contracts and research expectations. The article will present the perspectives of university administrators and faculty members as they try come to grips with a new reality in Ecuador's system of higher education.

Ecuador's Universities and Their Faculty: An Overview

Ecuador's Universities

Ecuador's first universities were founded by religious orders (Jesuits primarily) and based on the Spanish tradition of higher education, with a heavy influx of Catholic dogma. Curricula were mostly related to the social sciences and scientific research was uncommon. By the late 19th century, university curricula were updated to include more of the exact sciences and by 1895 Ecuador's early universities were formally

separated from the direct control of the Catholic Church and brought under the direct control of the central government.

The second half of the 20th century saw the creation of many of the country's private universities and since then free admission, cogovernance by students, faculty, and administrators and the inviolability of the universities' precincts have been dominant themes in the development of Ecuador's university system. It has led to a high degree of autonomy and academic freedom for universities and their faculties going into the 21st century.

At present, there are 57 universities in Ecuador. Twenty-nine of them are public and fall under the direct supervision of the country's legislature. In years past, public university budgets were made up of government appropriations and student tuition fees. However, since public education is now free and student admissions are coordinated centrally, public universities are now completely dependent on central government approval with regard to their budgets, curriculum innovation, administration, and student admissions. Private universities receive some financial support from the central government as well and have some autonomy with regard to curriculum development and administration. In 2007, 75% of the total national student body of 445,000 were enrolled in public universities (UNESCO Global Education Digest, 2009).

Over the years, questions have arisen about the differences between Ecuador's public and private universities and doubts have come up about the quality of the private institutions in particular. As Estrella (2011) states, "In the last accreditation process, of the 11 universities ranked in the highest category, 7 were public and 4 were private. By contrast, of the 26 institutions ranked in the lowest category, only 2 were public and 24 were private" (p. 23).

University Faculty

A majority of Ecuador's professorate is not full-time and universities have attracted many faculty members with practical experience to fill their needs for classroom instruction as part-time instructors. It is estimated that less than half of university faculty is full-time. Adjunct professors teach on a course-by-course basis and are not expected to be fully engaged in university life.

Full-time faculty members in the Ecuadorian system have heavy teaching loads as compared to international standards: they are expected to teach an average of 20 credits/hours a week and fulfill additional service and administrative responsibilities. There is no tenure or tenure-track system as is common in the United States, where tenure is closely related to the research mission of the university.

For permanent appointments, recruitment is conducted through a system of "public contests" in which a committee first assesses the careers of the applicants, followed by written and oral tests that verify the candidates' subject knowledge and their academic and teaching abilities. For temporary appointments, the system is much more lenient and varies entirely on the internal policies of the individual institutions. Faculty effectiveness is measured differently in the different universities, yet most institutions use a combination of self-evaluation, student feedback, and the departmental director's assessment.

Before the recent changes, full-time professors in public universities were expected to work 30 hr a week. This enabled many to find additional employment as university salaries were low. Yet, under the 2010 Higher Education Law, universities needed to find the resources to pay full-time faculty for an additional 10 hr a week; they had to ensure that faculty members dedicated time to research and service and they had to monitor faculty presence during the work day. Professors are expected to clock-in and clock-out by means of thumb print identification.

It has been difficult to attract foreign talent to come to work in Ecuador given the relatively low salaries of university professors as compared to other countries. Many Ecuadorians who have pursued graduate degrees abroad have decided to stay abroad, as salaries are more competitive, research opportunities are more plentiful, and resources are more readily available.

Since Ecuador's universities have mostly been focused on teaching at the undergraduate level, graduate-level education is scattered and immature. A great number of professors and administrators do not hold master's or doctoral degrees and less than 5% of Ecuador's professoriate hold PhD degrees, all of which obtained abroad. Presently, only two universities in the country offer PhD degree studies in the social sciences and no PhD studies have been completed in Ecuador so far.

The 2008 Constitution: Free Higher Education

Against this backdrop of a higher education system in which universities enjoyed a great deal of autonomy, most faculty members did not hold graduate degrees, teaching was dominant, and research activities were limited, some of the recent changes that occurred after the election of Rafael Correa have greatly affected the higher education system in Ecuador. In July 2008, the Constituent Assembly passed a Constitution that made sweeping changes to many areas of Ecuadorian life: it changed land-tenancy rights, natural resource management, and addressed various other economic, social, and environmental issues. It established people's rights to education, food and water, and health and social security.

The impact this new constitution had on higher education in Ecuador was considerable: it determined that the state would warrant the right for people to be educated in their own language and cultural spheres. Its goal was to provide academic and professional training, scientific research and technological innovation, the development and dissemination of knowledge, and the generation of solutions to the country's social and economic problems. It mandated that higher education be governed by a regulatory body and by public accreditation bodies that would be responsible for quality assurance. These regulatory and accrediting bodies now wield considerable power in Ecuador's higher education system. A resolution of the 2008 Constituent Assembly mandated that universities be ranked into five categories and in June 2012 the final results of those evaluations were released and 14 universities in the lowest category were closed outright.

The main impact of the new constitution, however, was that access to public higher education became free. The intent of this provision in the constitution was to

increase equality of opportunity and to enhance access for all qualified students into the system. In reality it meant that many public universities had to contend with an initial influx of students without an upward adjustment in their budget allocations. A secondary, and more contentious, outcome was that Ecuador's universities became completely dependent on the central government with regard to their annual budget appropriations. Many in the university community saw this as undermining the universities' autonomy, which was exacerbated by the fact that at present Ecuador "has no formula linking numbers of students to appropriations and it is unclear whether increases in appropriations will follow growing numbers of students" (Estrella, 2001, p. 23).

The 2010 Higher Education Law

In following up on the 2008 Constitution, Ecuador's Higher Education Law was passed in 2010 (Asamblea Nacional, 2010; Correa, 2011). This new law was in line with President Correa's desire to further increase university regulation, enhance their accountability, bring their efforts more in line with the country's development needs, and address some of the other areas the 2008 Constitution highlighted as in need of improvement. It stipulated the formation of several central administrative bodies who now manage, accredit, and fund the country's universities

Improvement of Faculty Qualifications

As stated earlier, most faculty members in Ecuador's higher education system do not hold graduate degrees and PhD qualifications are scarce. This might be expected in an environment where the emphasis historically and philosophically has been on the universities' teaching missions. Ecuador's government hopes to address this shortcoming by stipulating that all those who hope to join the university system as professors after 2010 need to have master's degrees. Before 2010 the only formal faculty requirement to teach at a university was a bachelor's degree. The law also set a 7-year time line (starting in 2010) for all faculty members employed in the university system to obtain doctoral degrees. The intent behind this requirement is clear: better educated professors will be able to provide a higher level education, will be able to conduct research independently, and will thereby raise the bar for the university system overall and assist the country in its economic and social development needs.

The government has realized the financial hardship of these new requirements and created a grant program for university faculty and the general public to pursue graduate degrees abroad. For 2013 the goal is to provide 3,000 grants that cover educational, cost of living, and travel expenses to other countries.

As there are few opportunities to pursue PhD studies in Ecuador, parties interested will have to study abroad at considerable personal and professional hardship. The government has published a list of 1,000 international universities that were approved for the pursuit of graduate studies to avoid faculty members studying at institutions of dubious academic quality. The measure also mandated that professors could only

pursue a graduate degree that was closely related to their area of teaching interest, making it very difficult for some to find proper graduate studies to pursue.

It will be interesting to see how many of those who are presently employed as university professors will initiate graduate studies and how many, especially those of more advanced age, will leave the system by retirement or resignation. The latter would exacerbate Ecuador's higher education problems since the most experienced professors would leave the system while the most talented ones are pursuing graduate degrees abroad. The law stipulates that professors employed without master's degrees in 2017 will be degraded in rank.

There is the further stipulation that for a university to be considered a "research university" by 2017 it must have 70% of its faculty holding doctoral degrees. To be recognized as a "research-teaching" university, 70% of the faculty need to have terminal qualifications (CEAACES, 2012). Given that less than 5% of the professors hold terminal degrees, many, if not all, universities risk foreclosure. Further centralization with a dwindling number of universities is imminent.

Changes in Faculty Employment

New legislation states that since professors are now paid full-time and fall under the control of a central governing body, they have to work full-time at the university as well. Coupled with the loss of autonomy and income and the perceived threat to their academic freedom, these new measures have many in the university system concerned and anxious. The government, however, is hopeful that its measures will enhance faculty productivity and research output and the effectiveness of the universities.

Enhancement of Research Output

A final, centrally driven, initiative to bolster the quality of higher education in Ecuador is the government's expectation that universities enhance the quality and quantity of their research output. As mentioned earlier, this lack of research output in the system is directly related to the lack of advanced, research-based education among its professors and the teaching emphasis that has dominated for centuries.

Research has historically received very little support in Ecuador's universities and the system does not provide adequate means for successful research: the research infrastructure is dated, there are no incentives for faculty to do research, there are no mechanisms to entice students to participate in research projects, and there is a lack of understanding of basic research methodology at the undergraduate, graduate, and faculty levels.

Informally, research initiatives are popping up all over the country, with faculty members starting to get together to look into how they can contribute to the research mission of their universities. These are laudable efforts that will hopefully continue and grow. Formally, universities are also looking into how they can organize resources and personnel around this new expectation. Yet, in both cases resources are scarce, as is expertise.

Perspectives of Administrators and Faculty

In this increasingly regulated system of higher education, university administrators and faculty members have tried to come to grips with these changes. The government's intentions and expectations are clear: greater demands on the research mission of the universities and the academic qualifications of faculty will bring Ecuador's universities more in line with similar institutions in South America and enhance their research output, thereby serving the country's economic and social development needs.

Centralizing student admissions, budget allocations and program accreditation should lead to greater efficiency and equality and will improve access to higher education. Mandating full-time faculty employment should lead to greater productivity and improve education at all levels. Ranking universities will raise the standards for all institutions of higher education and will weed out those that do not deserve to be called universities. In theory, all should be true.

Yet theory is not practice and as is often the case with dramatic and rapidly implemented changes, there is a heavy price to pay for those employed in the system, a price the government may not have fully anticipated. The following paragraphs will look at the changes through the eyes of university administrators and faculty and describe their concerns, frustrations, anxieties, and hopes as they see 2017 rapidly approaching.

The Administrator Perspective

Higher education in Ecuador has changed dramatically since 2008. The two new laws have radically transformed the existing rules of the relationship between Ecuador's central government and its universities. They have brought about many changes and challenges, as the previous pages described, both positive, such as the redefinition of what a university is and should be, and negative, such as the impact they have had on university autonomy and finances.

A positive change that came about was the implementation of a measurement system of university quality, something that was unthinkable in Ecuador as it was a country where national rankings did not exist. This process of measuring the quality of higher education institutions through central government organizations has led universities to realize that some universities are better than others. This, in turn, has led to internal changes that were necessary to achieve better ratings and it has aroused interest among universities to apply for international accreditations. Ecuador's highest level public universities are presently undergoing an accreditation process to be accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) in the United States.

Another positive development was the establishment of a scholarship scheme for students to be educated abroad in master's or doctorate programs. Well-educated researchers and educators can be the change agents and leaders of the future in the Ecuador's universities. Yet at what personal cost?

There have been other well-intended changes but their impact is not entirely clear at this point or they have turned out badly. For example, the government recently implemented the National Admissions and Leveling measure by means of which university admissions are now controlled at the central level for the first time in the country's history. Through a national aptitude test that is taken by any student interested in entering a university, the central administrative body, *Secretaría Nacional de Educación Superior, Ciencias, Tecnología e Innovación (SENESCYT)* decides on the profiles and scores that applicants need to be admitted: public universities no longer admit students, the government does. The results of this policy meant that at the University of Cuenca, for instance, admissions dropped by 30% in September 2012 as compared to September 2011.

Public universities are now also required to provide an additional semester of studies to incoming freshmen in so-called "leveling" courses if they do not pass the aptitude test. These teach students the subject knowledge they should have acquired in high school. Due to the poor quality of education at the secondary level (and the government acknowledging it by this measure) the universities are now obliged to offer additional coursework at their own cost, diverting the attention of administrators and professors from other issues of importance.

A further example of how the new measures did not have the intended effect is the problem of how public higher education is financed. The 2008 Constitution made education in public universities free of charge and the universities are now completely dependent on the central government. In practice this has led to a cancellation of pension payments for university employees, insufficient and reduced budgets, and further limitation of the financial means of the universities. This prevents them from investing in infrastructure, technology, or students and has resulted in many legal claims against the universities since 2010 that have, once again, taken time and energy away from university authorities.

With regard to research, Ecuador's universities were in need of a change and the 2010 Higher Education Act, which forced faculty to seek advanced degrees and universities to pay greater attention to research, was appropriate. Ecuador's universities have long struggled with the place and role of research in the system, given their limited resources, poor faculty training, and the absence of a "research culture." What the government hopes to accomplish is a change in that culture by setting new standards and expectations with rigorous and stiff penalties for noncompliance that range from loss of rank for faculty without advanced degrees to universities losing their status.

To meet those new standards, universities have to attract faculty with the ability and inclination to do research. Departments can hire researchers through a public, or open, competition, yet the Ecuadorian Public Service Act only allows programs to hire associate researchers for 2 years. Clearly, the legal infrastructure is not ready to deal with these newly increased research demands. An additional complicating issue for public universities is that they are bound by salary limits for the researchers they can hire, yet no such limits exist for private universities. Combined with the fact that public universities now rely completely on the state for limited resources, they face increasing demands on their teaching responsibilities and have no major sources of external

(research) revenues, they are at a considerable disadvantage as compared to their private counterparts.

The changes implemented represent a great challenge for higher education in Ecuador. They have been a rude awakening for some universities and a call to enhance quality for others. They have constituted a new way to see processes and have created a new model for higher education in Ecuador. University administrators all over the country have welcomed the intent behind the government's changes and they realize a change in university culture is needed. However, they are now hoping to be given the day-to-day resources to make the changes to create more balanced university system that is fair to those who work in it, that is supportive and appreciative of the role of research, and that rewards quality over quantity.

The Faculty Perspective

In changing times, with an increasingly dominant role of the central government in the university system, it is difficult to present an objective perspective of the impact that the recent changes have had on the professional and personal lives of professors. Many professors are afraid to speak out in fear of losing their positions, they are anxious about the new job requirements and they are concerned they cannot complete (or even find) the proper doctoral degrees. Universities do not speak out either because they are now completely dependent on the central government with regard to their budgets and their status. Concerns are exacerbated almost daily as new measures are announced; every new government edict leads to more anxiety and a greater feeling of decreased personal academic freedom. The following are a few examples of how the recent decisions have negatively impacted universities and university faculty.

Until recently, universities not only collected tuition fees from their students (which were based on the economic situation of their family) they could also receive a voluntary donation of 25% of the income taxes generated by any individual or corporation. However, when both the income tax donation and student tuition were abolished, it made university budgets completely dependent on the central government.

The recent creation of the National University of Education (to start in 2013) threatens to close several schools and colleges around the country. As teacher training will be centralized in one university and is taken away from the Colleges of Philosophy and Educational Sciences in the country's public and private universities, professors in those colleges are afraid of losing their jobs.

Professors are also afraid that they will lose their status as professors if they do not complete a PhD on time and that they will be degraded (but with the same salary) but without a chance for future promotion. This requirement has already led many to apply for retirement.

In this context of increased centralization of university administration and budgets and heightened academic requirements for professors, anxiety and insecurity abound. There is some understanding for the need to improve the quality of Ecuador's universities, yet little understanding about how the government is implementing those changes. The goals and the ways to achieve those goals are just too far apart.

Conclusion

Higher education in Ecuador is in enormous flux because of recent political changes. Questions have arisen about the role of universities in society, their accountability, their research mission and about faculty qualifications and productivity. The national government made education free to its citizens in an effort to improve access to the system and thereby abolished most of the tuition fee structure that was the basis of the universities' financial resources for years.

Ecuador's public universities are now completely dependent on central budget allocations and the balance of administrative power has shifted from the universities and to the central government. Requirements for faculty to hold advanced degrees and limitations to the employment situation of faculty members are additional proof of how far and how deep the government's new measures go.

Whereas the government is looking for greater access to the system for Ecuador's citizens, greater accountability from universities and an improvement in the quality of higher education and the research it conducts, university administrators and faculty members, although supportive of the intent behind the changes, are greatly concerned about the loss of financial and administrative autonomy and the negative impact these changes will have on academic freedom and on their futures. As the above perspectives of administrators and faculty have shown, these changes have come at great personal and professional cost and have greatly raised anxiety levels among faculty all over the country.

It is much too early to tell what the impact of many of the new measures will be. Post (2011) indicates that the intended effect of free higher education, namely, greater access for disadvantaged groups, has not yet occurred and that it might not happen at all if not accompanied by even greater investments in the educational system as a whole. He advocates for greater expenditures and enhancement of quality in basic education so that "more children from poor families and with indigenous roots will persist to graduation, and will be eligible for the benefits of free public higher education" (p. 16). Similarly, Estrella (2011) argues that the gap between poor and middle class children attending university grew larger rather than smaller from 2007 to 2009. He states that "the beneficiaries of 'free' university education will come from the most-advantaged populations in Ecuador unless the quality of primary and secondary education improves" (p. 22).

The future of Ecuador's university system is at peril if nothing is done about the lack of research and scholarship. Ecuador's universities have long been teaching institutions and very little in their mandates or in their expectations of their faculty members has been related to research. Whereas universities are drivers of change in many societies and play important roles in social mobility and enhancing economic development, their role in Ecuador primarily lies in educating undergraduates. There is no denying that it is time for change, yet one may argue about how this change is to be brought about.

Strategic planning requires bold thinking and an ambitious mindset and Ecuador's government has shown both. However, strategic planning also asks for objectives that

are attainable and realistic, that motivate people, and that create a communality of interests. This is where the recent changes may have overreached. Mandating all faculty members to obtain graduate degrees within a relatively short period of time could lead to increased retirements from leading senior faculty members.

Rarely has a country seen changes to its higher education system as drastic and rapid as the changes that Ecuador's system is presently undergoing. It is a bold social experiment and only the future will tell if the changes will have the desired effect.

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Author Biographies

Hubert B. Van Hoof, PhD, is a professor of Strategic Management at the Penn State School of Hospitality Management. During the 2012-2013 academic year he was a Prometeo Scholar at the University of Cuenca, Ecuador.

Mateo Estrella is a professor at the Facultad de Ciencias de la Hospitalidad at the University of Cuenca, Ecuador and the President's Office Academic Advisor.

Maria-Isabel Eljuri is a professor at the Facultad de Ciencias de la Hospitalidad at the University of Cuenca, Ecuador and the Director of the Office of International Relations.

Leonardo Torres León is a professor at the Facultad de Ciencias de la Hospitalidad at the University of Cuenca, Ecuador.