

Introducing tuition into public higher education: beyond generic consideration

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Resumen

Las colegiaturas en la educación superior deben ser un elemento contingente de acuerdo al contexto de cada caso. Este enfoque va contra los argumentos tradicionalmente sostenidos entre los que sostienen su aplicación y sus detractores. Ambos bandos generalizan en exceso sus argumentos, polarizando la discusión. Una posición moderada pugnaría por la introducción de una colegiatura limitada, pero aun esta idea se ubica en el punto intermedio del espectro lineal de ambos extremos. El enfoque contrario que aquí se discute es que lo “posible” y lo “correcto”, depende de las circunstancias particulares. Así, se considera el contexto macro, político y económico, para abordar después las variables propias de la educación superior.

Palabras clave: políticas públicas, financiamiento, cuotas.

Abstract

On a case by case basis, tuition applicable to higher education must be applied as a contingent resource. This point of view goes against traditional arguments between supporters and those who oppose application. Both sides generalize their arguments too much and polarize the discussion. A moderate position would look for the introduction of a limited tuition, but this idea is in between the linear spectrum between both ends. The opposite point of view discussed in the paper says that that which is “possible” and “correct” depends on particular circumstances. Therefore, a macro, political and economic context is suggested in order to undertake the variables inherent to higher education.

Key words: public policies, financing, fees.

Introduction

Most of the writing and attention to the matter of introducing tuition into public universities deals with the case for and against. The clash over what is right is often polemical, with positions about appropriate policy exaggerated. The tact in this paper is not to enter directly into bolstering one side over the other or even to better establishing where, between the two extremes, lies “the truth.” Rather, the theme here is that tuition is—and indeed should be—contingent on context.

This theme runs basically counter to the generic nature of most debates about tuition. Both the advocates and their critics typically make over-generalized arguments. Advocates, often incredulous at the absence of a policy that appears to them irrefutably justified on equity and efficiency grounds, argue why tuition is essential for public higher education. Critics, equally incredulous about the assault on progressive policy, or the intrusion of narrow economic criteria onto educational matters, argue why tuition is wrong for public higher education.

Of course not everyone is in one extreme camp or the other, though the polemics often make it seem that way. Moderates may favor introducing only limited tuition as well as compromises such as using the fresh revenue for specific programs that benefit students¹. But even such moderate positions tend toward the generic: the appropriate answer, albeit somewhere along a linear spectrum between two extremes. The contrary approach forwarded here is that both what is likely and what is “right” depend on particular circumstances. We sketch the point first regarding the macro political-economic context, second regarding higher education variables.

¹. In the many systems that still have no tuition, it is easier to associate some advocates of tuition with moderate positions. That is, opponents are against tuition whereas proponents are in favor of making tuition (usually with loans) part of the financial mix.

The macro political-economic context

Tuition is much more logical in certain political-economic contexts than others. Implicitly at least, antagonists understand this. Advocates of tuition do not expect to find tuition in traditional Communist states whereas critics see that tuition becomes more likely with neoliberalism. These concessions to reality do not, however, usually translate into normative views. But major tuition would make no sense in a social welfare system, whether democratic or authoritarian, based heavily on the idea of State responsibility. Similarly, tuition is part of a piece in a much more market oriented, plural system².

These affinities between type of political-economic system and tuition link most evidently to the State's more or less expansive role in finance, but they also link to a much wider range of matters. The matters include the degree of standardized rule-setting, centralization, choice for clients, competition, and, overall, views of what should be the driving forces for higher education policy, emanating from where. Extreme views or practices on these matters could lead to clear ramifications for tuition, but where various mixes of State, societal, market, institutional, and actor roles are at play, ramifications are harder to deduce.

All this plays into the broader analytical point that too much debate about tuition in the academic and policy literature is myopic about the broader political-economic context. Too many opponents of tuition are utopian in their progressive ideology and thus ignore realities such as cost constraints as countries modernize while their higher education systems expand mightily. Too many advocates of tuition, notably economists with little political awareness, speak as if there were one clear right way to proceed, except that irrational interest-group politics intervene. But consider, for example, how one point of contention is in fact context contingent. Advocates of tuition argue that tuition frees State funds for more progressive use in primary education, but whether that alternative outcome is likely or remote depends largely on the overall configuration of political forces in the wider system³.

We might here introduce a few words specifically on Mexico. The lack of tuition until recently reflected crucial realities of the wider political-economic system. Paramount among these was that, though authoritarian, the system was largely oriented toward alliances and accommodation between the State and privileged groups, very much including the middle class and its aspirations for mobility. Similarly, the introduction of tuition in state universities follows logically with the movement toward neoliberalism. One can expect tuition to spread further, and regard this trend as logical for the neoliberal system, while still understanding that tuition was on balance illogical for Mexico during its decades of *desarrollo estabilizador*.

Higher education variables

Both the likelihood and appropriateness of tuition also depend on a range of higher education variables.

Size and inclusiveness are relevant. Most advocates and opponents of tuition base views on generic principals and then invoke size and inclusiveness to their ends. Thus, advocates argue that exclusive systems need tuition because otherwise the many pay for the few, but inclusive systems need tuition because otherwise the State expenditures soar. Meanwhile, opponents who may have once dismissed tuition as unnecessary because States could shoulder the limited costs of small systems now argue that tuition is especially dangerous as higher education incorporates many more families of modest means and should incorporate more.

². The point is not that a correspondence always exists in fact, though tuition has been much more likely in market than statist political-economic systems. Insofar as some market systems have not charged higher education tuition, it makes sense for advocates of tuition to highlight the discrepancy between higher education and general political-economic dynamics; defenders of the status quo would then have to make a case for higher education's exceptionalism.

³. Indeed, the overall context of other levels of education is relevant, including who and how many pass through what levels, through what mix of subsidy and payment. Such factors are usually left aside in generic arguments. Sometimes they are invoked in support of one side, usually the pro-tuition side, but it is rare to see consideration of the idea that under situation x higher education makes much more or less sense than under situation.

Even if one allows that there is some truth in each of these conflicting positions, the point is how rare it is to see nuanced positions that declare tuition appropriate under x but not y conditions. As advanced systems approach “universal” higher education, how many traditional supporters of tuition will decide that higher education now deserves the public funding long associated with universal secondary education? But even at present, and in Third World countries, enormous variation exists within higher education systems. Far too little debate about tuition is sensitive to the differentiation that has been a dominant aspect of growth for many decades. Although both sides may cite certain aspects of differentiation as bolstering their case, their case usually remains generic.

Yet the realities and therefore rationales for and against tuition should be quite different depending on what higher education is considered. Although most antagonists continue to talk about “universities,” more and more systems have fewer universities than other types of higher education institutions, with substantial enrollments in different sectors such as technical institutes, colleges, and teacher training facilities.

Another differentiation, already striking in Latin America’s more developed systems for example, concerns graduate education. Doctoral programs usually remain small but have expanded while both Masters and “*especialidades*” are becoming massive. And these programs have often introduced tuition even though it remains absent at the *pregrado* level, as in Argentina and Venezuela. This undergraduate-graduate juxtaposition is probably most easily understood in terms of the latter escaping the traditional barriers of the former, but neither at the normative nor the analytical level has the debate and literature come to grips with the development. A related point concerns which students taking a graduate degree abroad pay or should pay or be financed by home country scholarships.

Heavily related to the variable of inter-institutional differentiation and partly related to the *pregrado/posgrado* variable is the matter of functional differentiation. The Inter-American Development Bank’s higher education strategy paper (1997) identifies four major functions. Although these cannot be adequately identified and analyzed here, the basic point is that each has different dynamics and purposes and should be treated differently. In the case of tuition, the salient reality for most of Latin America remains the absence of *pregrado* tuition in public higher education regardless of function.

Advocates of tuition rail against this with their package of generic arguments. A more appropriate approach would detail how the argument is particularly strong for most “technical” and “professional” higher education and how it is different but reasonable for aspects of the much distorted and often poorly functioning “general” higher education where students enroll in professional faculties but wind up with employment not directly linked to those studies. Crucially, however, “academic leadership” is a function for which most tuition arguments fail. This point relates to the basic public goods arguments that justify subsidization more than client payments⁴. At the same time, various equity arguments play out differently depending upon which function is under consideration, both because the activities are different and because the clienteles are different.

⁴. In this connection, another key aspect of higher educational differentiation is field of study. This is particularly important in systems where *pregrado* education focuses on a given field or faculty, as opposed to the U.S. liberal arts model.

Looking ahead

Unless one takes an extreme, generic view for or against tuition, both what is feasible and what is appropriate depend on all the factors sketched above. Those factors might mean the introduction of major tuition in some settings, sporadic and limited tuition in others, and the absence of tuition in others. Whatever conclusions are ultimately reached, and in fact they should be continually reassessed and adjusted, the arguments and rationales should vary greatly depending on both the political-economic context and the part of the differentiated higher education system under consideration⁵.

Finally, this article has left aside a phenomenon that gives strong support to the theme that tuition policy is appropriately considered as context contingent. Both regionally and globally, one of the most notable trends in higher education is the explosion of private institutions. These link to overall political-economic changes. And they reconfigure all the aspects of higher education differentiation cited above. That the proliferating privates charge tuition is generally rather obvious. What the proliferation means for the rationales for and against the introduction of tuition in public higher education has hardly been considered. Yet it affects virtually every variable and rationale concerning that introduction⁶. Partisans have every right to remain staunchly for or against the introduction regardless of how the variables are affected, but enlightened partisans and certainly policymakers and scholars have no right to ignore the implications of the new private-public dynamics. The same holds for all the contextual and higher education variables sketched in this article.

⁵. The IDB strategy paper argues that the absence of tuition is still too generalized in Latin America. However, it identifies several points that qualify the advocacy: the public clientele is not mostly upper class, equity issues are complex and higher education must be about much more than direct impacts on equity, tuition is only one aspect of equity as well as crucial efficiency and performance issues, and students' higher education produces public goods. But each of these points is in fact a variable; depending on how it plays out in what part of higher education, the rationale for tuition strengthens, weakens, or at least changes.

⁶. The private proliferation affects the gross amount of funding, the State proportion, the university/non-university mix and the mix of different fields and functions, the student socioeconomic profile, ties to the job market, the comparative advantages of public higher education institutions including their devotion to outputs features public goods, and complex relationships between finance on the one hand and both incentives and performance on the other. All these factors, and more, require analysis.