

Towards a Deepening of Labour-Power Differentiation: Five Decades of Transformation in the Argentine Higher Education System

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Abstract

The expansion process of Latin American higher education systems experienced in recent decades has drawn the attention of many scholars. Its impact has been assessed in relation to the broadening of access to education for the low-income sectors and the reduction of social inequality; likewise, the market's capacity to absorb a greater number of qualified workers has also been analysed. Therefore, it has been suggested that the consolidation of a process of 'credentialism' may be gaining momentum whereby: despite a moderate success rate in the expansion of access to higher education, inequalities would not have been reduced; rather, only a deterioration in the value of degrees would have taken place. This paper centres around the expansion process in the Argentine public university system and addresses these topics. We will argue that, despite taking a distinct course of its own, this expansion process falls within the phenomenon of institutional diversification which swept Latin America in the 1960s. The diversification of the Argentine higher education system developed with particular intensity within the university system, where the characteristics and performance of the different universities vary greatly. This, in turn, facilitated the advancement of labour-power differentiation.

Introduction

The expansion process of Latin American higher education systems experienced in recent decades has drawn the attention of many scholars. Its impact has been assessed in relation to the broadening of access to education for the low-income sectors and the reduction of social inequality; likewise, the market's capacity to absorb a greater number of qualified workers has also been analysed (de Moura Castro & Levy, 2000; Filgueira, Bogliaccini, Litjenstein, & Rodríguez, 2006; Rama, 2015; Sendon, 2013). Therefore, it has been suggested that the consolidation of a process of 'credentialism' may be gaining momentum whereby, despite a moderate success rate in the expansion of access to higher education systems, inequalities would not have been reduced; rather, only a deterioration in the value of degrees would have taken place (Collins, 1979; Dore, 1980; Chiroleu & Marquina, 2017).

Simultaneously, the very character of these expansion processes has also been studied. In particular, it has been highlighted that the background institutional diversification process under which these reforms were implemented has only reproduced the social inequalities they set out to redress (Rama, 2009; Brunner, 2011; Brunner & Ferrada Hurtado, 2011).

This paper centres around the expansion process in the Argentine public university system and addresses these topics. This case is significant because of the rapid pace in which the massification process developed. In fact, as we shall see, since the late 1960s, it became clear that not only did enrolment expansion fail to be appropriately incorporated into the existing infrastructure but also that both the character and performance of the university system faced several complex issues, such as graduation and dropout rates and the concentration of enrolment in only a handful of degrees (mostly traditional ones, such as Medicine and Law). As a result, an initial reform took place in the early 1970s.

This reform, however, could not improve those rates nor could it divert enrolment towards degrees deemed strategic to economic development. At first glance, it seems that its only result was a mere institutional expansion of the system, since the number of universities multiplied across the country. A second wave of expansion, implemented throughout the 1990s, produced a similar outcome. And neither has the third wave of expansion, introduced in the late 2000s and mid-2010s, fared any better (at least so far).

Throughout this paper, we will argue that, despite taking a distinct course of its own, this expansion process falls within the phenomenon of institutional diversification which swept Latin America in the 1960s. The diversification of the Argentine higher education system developed with particular intensity within the public university system, where the characteristics and performance of the different universities vary greatly. This, in turn, facilitated the advancement of labour-power differentiation.

In order to analyse this process, we will characterise the university as an institution that acts on the development of the workers' productive subjectivity; namely, the development of their skills to participate in different production processes. In this sense, its transformation should be considered in relation to the specific nature of the Argentine process of capital accumulation. We will then further this analysis by defining the general character adopted by labour-power differentiation and summarise some of the identifying features this process acquired in other countries. In the following section, we will describe the process of university expansion in Argentina, which came about throughout several attempts at reform, and present some of its main outcomes. Finally, we will explore some of its implications.

The analysis presented herein allows us to introduce an explanatory hypothesis with regard to the deepening of labour-power differentiation (a process which has been addressed in scholarly literature from different angles). We will argue that the character and performance of the public university system in Argentina is determined by labour-power demand, which is in turn determined by the specificity of the process of capital accumulation. On the one hand, this process requires that only a relatively small fraction of workers expand their productive attributes to an extent corresponding with the completion of a university degree, whereas it suffices that another comparatively larger fraction advances partially closer towards graduation. On the other hand, the public secondary school system has entered a phase of partial deterioration, since an increasing fraction of the Argentine population does not require an expansion of productive attributes through secondary education. Nevertheless, this deterioration advanced to such an extent that the demand of workers with relatively simple productive attributes, or those with a certain development of such attributes, is not always enough to cover the existing demand. Thus, the university system has also begun to allow a fraction of them to improve such attributes.

To support this argument, we will use different statistical sources. The analysis of the performance of Argentine universities relies mainly on the data collected by the *Yearbooks (Anuarios)* published by the Ministry of Education. To compare the performance of this system with other national cases, we will rely on statistics gathered by both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Differences in Labour-Power Production Within Capitalism

Because of its own functioning, the capitalist mode of production is constantly pushing for the development of productive forces of social labour, that is, the

technical conditions of production. In so doing, it continuously transforms the workers' productive subjectivity. Specifically, after the development of the machinery system, the differences in individual productive capacities and the very limits that the human body and mind set on productivity expansion are overcome. As a result, human labour is based less and less on the application of force and skills upon an object, since these are objectified in the machinery (Marx, 2006 (1867)).

As machinery, the instrument of labour assumes a material mode of existence which necessitates the replacement of human force by natural forces, and the replacement of the rule of thumb by the conscious application of natural science (Marx, 2006 (1867), pág. 508).

This results in a noticeable fragmentation of the workers' productive subjectivity, which takes on three main forms. First, capital no longer needs a fraction of these workers to develop their productive attributes beyond what is necessary to operate the machinery system, to which they become a mere appendage. In other words, their productive subjectivity is downgraded to the execution of relatively simple tasks, a phenomenon referred to in scholarly literature as 'deskilling'. Second, the production of relative surplus value through the machinery system turns another section of workers into surplus population, which strips them of their possibility of taking part in the social process of production and, therefore, of consumption, also removing their chance to reproduce their productive subjectivity and even their own natural lives. In contrast, a third fraction of workers expand their productive attributes. This fraction focuses on the development of the collective worker's capacity to move forwards in the control of natural forces and their objectification within the machinery system, as well as in the organisation of the collective character

of labour. These are, indeed, developments that can only be carried out on a scientific basis (Iñigo Carrera, 2013).

The development of the workers' productive attributes demanded by capital is achieved on a twofold basis. A fraction of them develop these attributes in the production process itself. For this to happen, however, they must go through a previous education process. As Baldino & Cabral (2013) state, "in the social practices that occur in school, students, teachers and the administrative personnel participate in a process of transformation of student's 'labour-power, initially simpler and less qualified, into a commodity of higher value'" (Baldino & Cabral, 2013, pág. 80).

The education system then becomes the specific way by which the different fractions of the working class develop the productive attributes demanded by capital (Rikowski, 1990; 1995; 1996; 1997; Baldino & Cabral, 2013, 2015). Therefore, the different educational levels are also regulated (directly or indirectly) by national governments, which, as representatives of all capital operating within their territories, need to ensure the production and reproduction of labour-power, i. e. , "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind" (Marx, 2006 (1867), pág. 270)

The Differentiation Process in Western Europe and the United States

Since the early 1960s, a distinct process of institutional diversification of higher education systems began to take shape in many countries, among which the United States and the countries of Western Europe stand out. This was linked to the massive enrolment in higher education, which grew over sixfold, from 13 million students in 1960 to 82 million in 1995 (Tiechler, 2006, 31). This

expansion process became sharper in industrialised countries, which currently possess the so-called education megasystems; namely, higher education systems that gather more than two million students (Gaudilla, 2008, 25). Germany, France, and Great Britain, three of the more economically developed countries, went from having 1% of the total population enrolled in university (some 150,000 students) to having millions of students taking courses (in the United States, this phenomenon began slightly earlier). This exponential increase of the student body also took place in other European and non-European countries (Hobsbawm, 1999, 298), as it became a key policy of nation state model, democracy and development.

As Trow (1976) points out, this increase in enrolment was accompanied by structural transformations within the university system.¹ Owing to issues related to tradition, functions, and budget, elite universities were unable to absorb such enrolment increase. Moreover, some of these institutions had to be revamped into mass universities, with a brand-new set of functions. This restructuring process, Trow argues, resulted in a source of differentiation for the incoming students' profile—evidenced in the age of admission or the curriculum, for instance—their academic path, and the education received, which created differences in the quality of education, as well as in the relationship between students and faculty. Simultaneously, these institutions began to differ in terms of size, management, and administration. Thus, the process of expansion came coupled with the initial phase of institutional diversification and differentiation (Shavit, 2007).

This paved the way for the emergence of discussions during the 1960s about the role of higher education in different countries. Of particular interest is the establishment of the theory of 'human capital', which highlighted the importance of investing in education to guarantee economic growth and

development of the post-war society. As a result, new alternatives of higher education were pursued to satisfy the demands of secondary school leavers and the professional requirements of future employers (Altbach, 2009). As regards the new degrees, there was an attempt to reduce study times, decrease government expenditure, and establish official controls over the functioning of the institutions and students' education (García de Fanelli y Trombetta, 1992). Overall, this process took two forms. The first and most favoured one consisted in an institutional diversification within the higher education system, allowing non-university institutions to create new degrees. The second was based on the implementation of reforms within the universities themselves, so that they could offer short degrees mainly focused on technical education.

In other words, as the rate of enrolment increased, these countries began to implement different measures to meet demand by diversifying the offer. Some countries expanded the private sector for mass enrolment, and kept the public sector for what was termed as “elite” education; others, instead, left the private sector for elites, and conducted the enrolment growth into the public institutions. In Europe, two strategies were developed to provide shorter higher education degrees: the creation of non-university institutions and the diversification of the academic offer within universities themselves through the introduction of short-term degree courses and/or career-oriented degrees. The United States also opted for institutional diversification and the incorporation of a binary system of university and non-university institutions. Likewise, we can also find contrasted paths even within longer educational cycles in relation to a chosen degree, be it a ‘professional’ or a ‘research’ one. Between 1945 and 1975, more than 600 institutions were created, being 500 of them two-year colleges. Enrolment in the public sector grew from 49 to 79% (Cohen & Kisker, 2009). In the private sector, 325 institutions expanded the system. The case of California stands out, since it responded to the increase in enrolment by

developing a system composed by research universities, state colleges and universities, and community colleges. As Ballerini (2018) states, several institutional shifts occurred during this period allowing for further institutional stratification. The last two decades of the twentieth century experienced an increase not only in enrolment, but also from different income groups. The most significant change was the concentration of low-income students at public two-year colleges (Paulsen & Smart, 2001).

The answer to the increase in enrolment in Latin America differs greatly if we take into account the above-mentioned countries. Within the public system, there has been an attempt to absorb the high level of demand with a broader offer of professional degrees. Further, the establishment of non-university tertiary institutions has not translated into an overhaul of traditional universities, since many of them also offer both professional and long-term degrees (García de Fanelli & Balán, 1994, 4).

The general outcome of these processes meant that higher education systems began to form an increasingly differentiated labour-power in respect to the development of its productive attributes. In fact, the quality of education gradually began to change, and different degrees with a new orientation and of varying lengths were introduced. Therefore, the graduates' productive subjectivity acquired varying levels of development.

As Rikowski highlights, the social production of labour-power is a process that is highly fragmented between institutions (Rikowski, 2007). We argue that this fragmentation and its subsequent differentiation of labour-power also takes place within each institution. In particular, we focus on the post-secondary system.

We will now analyse the Argentine case, which originally took on a different course from the rest.

Argentina's public university system

Until 1918, Argentina's universities were considered elite institutions, because they held a small group of students and were managed by conservative sectors. Due to the rising immigration in the first decades of the twentieth century, there was an increase in the enrolments and that led, in turn, to access for new societal groups. In the University of Córdoba, the oldest one of the country, these new groups denounced the elite nature of the institution, pushed for democratization of access and fought for student participation in the university government. This action started what later was known as the 1918 Córdoba Reform Movement. Although the Movement led to access for middle class groups, it was not until the end of the 1940's, when Juan Domingo Peron was in power that the university turned into a massive system.

During his government, Peron removed all restrictions to access, tuition fees were eliminated in 1950, and in 1953 so were all the entrance exams. His goal was to allow low income and working-class students to attend college. This social democratization process via education led to a major growth in university enrolment, and soon new problems arose. As a consequence of the university massification, a new agenda was drawn for the next years: the main issues were infrastructure deficit, overpopulation of students, low graduation rates and budget restrictions (Buchbinder, 2005).

After Peron, Argentina went through democratic as well as dictatorial governments. Regarding education, and specifically the university system, each of them displayed different strategies to respond to the increase in demand for higher education. In 1956 two public new universities were created and, in

1958, the passing of a law that allowed private institutions led to the expansion of the private sector. However, a significant reshape took place some years later. Between 1971 and 1975, 16 new public universities were created. The initial idea was to diversify the public system, but as we shall see, that goal did not come to its end (Mendonça, 2018c). Finally, the last military government reinstated tuition fees, entrance exams and quotas, which excluded a big portion of the population from higher education. Thus, as Ballerini (2018) states, “the history of public higher education in Argentina before the definite establishment of free tuition in 1983 has been characterized by a tension between an open, autonomous and democratizing system, and a selective, politically controlled, and more conservative system” (p. 58). Despite these actions, the existing problems remained and the performance of the Argentine public university system exhibited a series of critical issues since the end of the 1960’s (Mendonça, 2015a).

Although after the passing of the law new private universities were created, the public university system continued to be the largest one in the country. Unlike other Latin American countries, the private sector in Argentina never reached more than 20% of the enrolment (Ballerini, 2018). In this scenario, we aim to argue that the massification of the university system in the country was accompanied with a differentiation process that, despite the creation of non-university institutions and private universities, took place among the public sector. And this, as we will also claim, turned into a concrete form of the advancement of labour-power differentiation.

The Expansion Process

As already mentioned, towards the end of the 1960s, university enrolment began to expand at a very rapid pace throughout the world. Global actors such as the OECD, and the World Bank encourage a competitive comparison of

national indicators of economic competitiveness, being one of the most important ones the number of college graduates (Robertson in Ballerini, 2018). Different countries have tried to outstand their performance when it comes to higher education graduates. In the case of Argentina, since the late sixties, it has been a key worry for the governments. By then, the general performance of the Argentine university system exhibited a series of critical issues that led some government agencies (and even some academic research teams) to publish reports on the matter. These reports highlighted, among other aspects, that retention and graduation rates were particularly low and that a significant section of enrolment focused on “traditional” degrees, such as Medicine or Law (Mendonça, 2015a).

The reform of the university system sought to tackle these issues. The above-mentioned reports submitted a series of recommendations for the implementation of a university policy destined to correct these deficiencies and restructure the system to make it more efficient. Specifically, it was suggested that new degrees should be created in priority fields, i.e. those linked to economic development, and that enrolment should be redirected towards them. Moreover, completion rates should be increased through the creation of technical and shorter degrees, as well as an offer of intermediate degrees in longer programmes, and dropout rates should be reduced by means of admission courses and vocational guidance spaces, modifying academic structures to facilitate degree changes and implementing a grants system, among other aspects.

The first attempt at reform came during the 1971–75 period, when 16 national universities were created across the country (Mendonça, 2017). It is worth noting that some of the reports put forth the idea of establishing a few universities to decentralise enrolment from larger institutions as part of a

comprehensive reform plan; however, it was also suggested to specifically avoid the emergence of new higher education institutions, given that they could end up becoming “non-profitable units” (Mendonça, 2015a).

After the fall of the last Military Junta (1976–83), which had triggered a severe contraction in enrolment as a direct result of the repression unleashed upon students and the implementation of admission courses, the number of incoming students grew strongly again. This new growth was a phenomenon that mainly took place in old traditional universities, which were based in large urban centres. In this scenario, a second wave of expansion took place in the 1990s, increasing the number of universities to 35.

This coincided with the reform of the higher education system of 1993, influenced by international organisations such as UNESCO and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as credit agencies like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (Rodríguez-Gómez & Alcántara, 2010; Escujuri, 2017). Many of their recommendations were related to institutional financing, management, and organisation, with a special emphasis on cost reduction, tuition fees, and the search for alternative financing. Moreover, there was a need to promote access to private universities in response to the high demand (García de Fanelli, 1997a). Claiming that the structural rigidity of the universities had to be addressed to meet the demands of a complex and dynamic labour market, it was suggested that new institutions could offer more flexible programmes and courses and that their degrees could reflect that demand (Villanueva, 2010).

This expansion phase presents similar aspects to, and markedly distinct features than, previous ones. For instance, the institutions established during this period were mostly the result of parliamentary legislation with no feasibility studies

whatsoever to support them (García de Fanelli, 1997b). Further, the universities created during the previous processes were based in the provinces within the country and sought to emphasise a regional profile; a large section of the second-wave universities, however, were established in Buenos Aires' suburban areas.ⁱⁱ It was expected that this would decentralise enrolment in old traditional universities.ⁱⁱⁱ There was also an attempt to improve graduation and dropout rates through the creation of short-term degree courses. In many cases, the proposal consisted in offering an intermediate degree for longer programmes, allowing for the certification of acquired knowledge during the first years of attendance (García de Fanelli, 1997b, 32).^{iv} Once again, it was sought to deflect enrolment towards those degrees deemed a priority, which, during this period, were closely linked to the fields of Basic Sciences and Technology. Another common aspect was the academic structure that these new universities were based on, which also attempted to avoid the traditional organisation by faculties. In the same vein, these second-wave universities also aimed at establishing a direct link between research and the local context (García de Fanelli, 1997b, 81). We ought to mention also that different mechanisms began to be adopted to restrict admission based on the requirements of the Argentine Higher Education Act (Ley de Educación Superior) passed in 1994. At the same time, student financial support was introduced, mainly focused on improving graduation and retention rates.

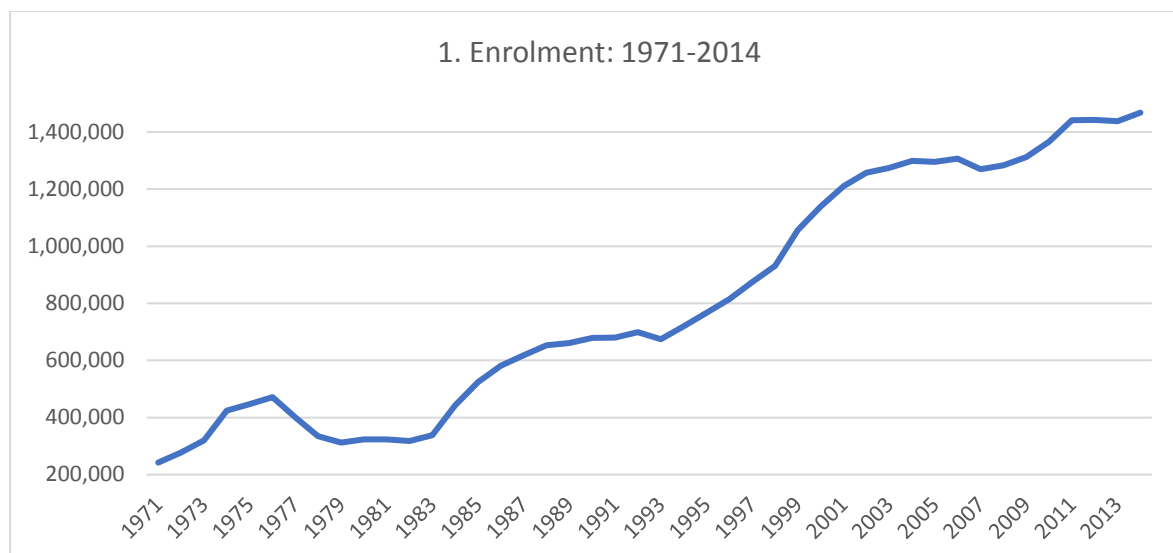
The third and last wave of expansion began in 2008 under the government of Cristina Fernández and yielded the creation of 18 new universities. The Buenos Aires suburbs turned once more into the epicentre of this expansion process, hosting 8 of these new institutions. The structure and functioning of these universities present a series of similar traits to those universities established during the previous period. First, it was sought to draw in the local population by linking student academic activities with territorial demands. Second,

academic structure was once again organised into departments, institutes, and/or schools. Third, the academic offerings related to Applied Sciences (particularly Engineering and Social Sciences) and Medical Sciences (especially Nursing) were promoted once more. The latter had been a field of study which until then had remained restricted to older universities. These universities currently offer short-term degree courses, which cater to the need of improving graduation and dropout rates, as well as providing students with degrees that certify their years of study, albeit not necessarily qualifying degrees for practice.

Efforts to improve retention and graduation rates were also reflected in the adoption of strategies destined to offset the academic difficulties that students carried along upon admission, such as tutoring and levelling and/or revision courses. At the same time, these universities allocated part of their resources to the implementation of internal student aid, seeking to cover the costs of transportation, books, study materials, etc. This was coupled with the introduction of broader grants programmes promoted by the national government and destined to low-income students. These were aimed at improving admission and retention rates and encouraging the completion of degree courses, as well as technical and teaching degrees (García de Fanelli, 2015, 26; Chiroleu & Marquina, 2017).

The Transformation of the University System

Let us now turn to the results of these expansion processes in the longer term. The first aspect that comes to our attention is that the increase in the number of institutions allowed for a growth in enrolment at a different pace throughout the period.

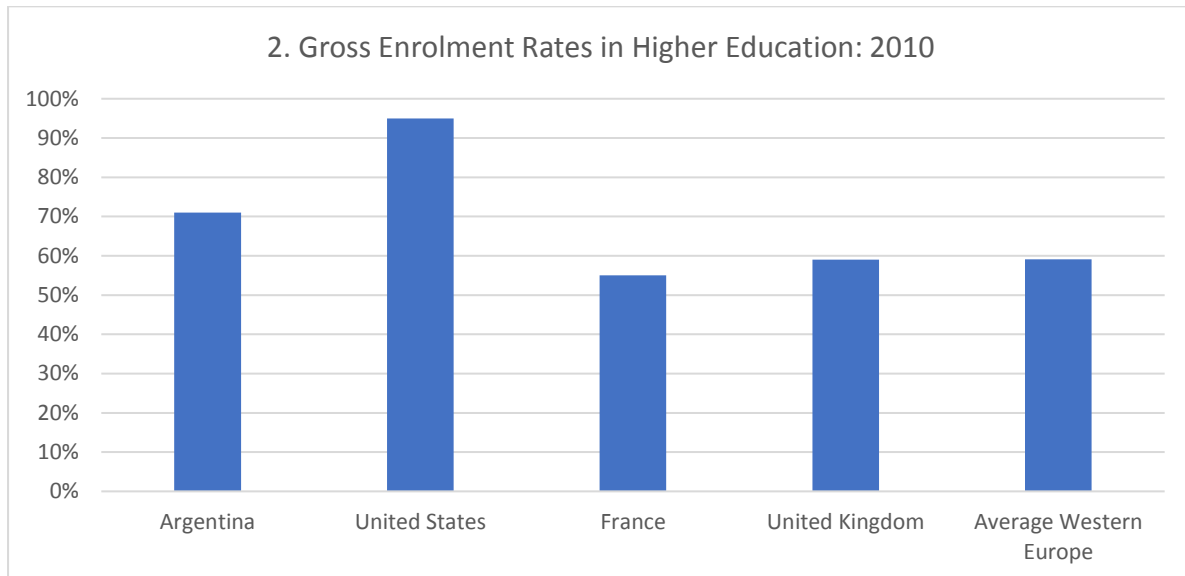


Sources: Ministry of Education, 1968, 1971, 1982, 1993, 1996, 2007, and 2014.

Enrolment expansion spread unevenly across the country. According to the reports mentioned above, one of the critical features of this system at the end of the 1960s was related to the concentration of enrolment around traditional universities. Even though the establishment of 16 brand-new universities throughout the country in the first five years of the 1970s failed to reverse this phenomenon (Mendonça, 2018c). The situation changed by the end of the third-wave period: in 2014, the largest 5 traditional universities already concentrated at least half of the enrolment rate. Thus, a 12% of the total enrolment was absorbed by new universities in the Greater Buenos Aires area, despite this segment of the student body being spread across no less than 13 higher education institutions (Ministry of Education, 2015).

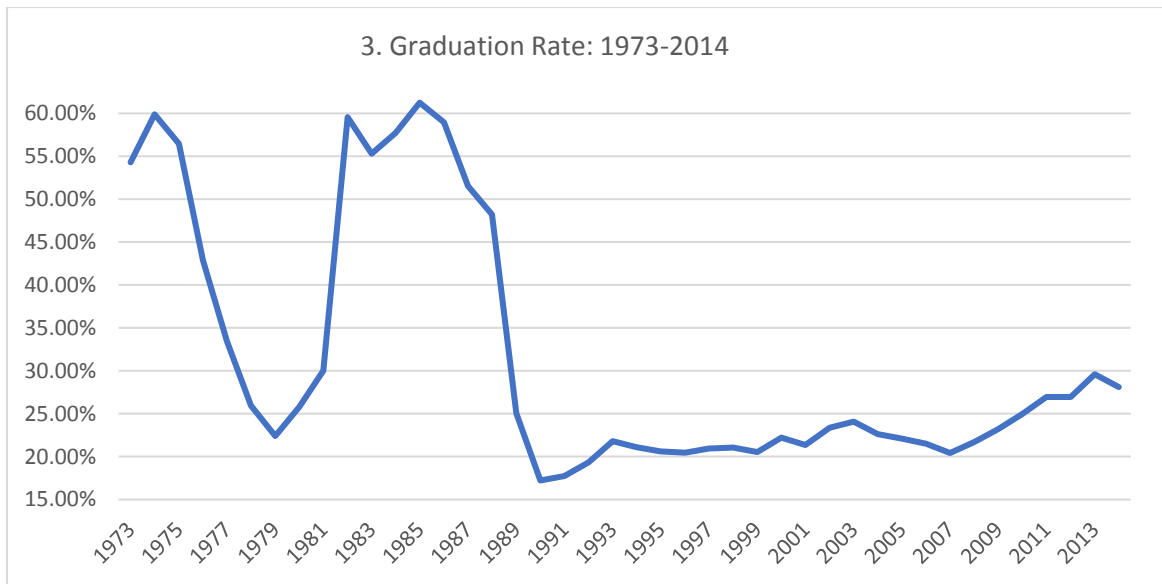
Nevertheless, records show that institutional expansion made it possible to sustain a high rate of enrolment since the end of the 1960s. Net and gross rates of university enrolment reached 21% and 52.1%, respectively, towards 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2013), which sets relatively high values. As for the totality of the public system of higher education, the gross rate of enrolment in

2012 was 71%, which is a higher figure than the rest of the countries we have chosen to compare, with the exception of the United States.



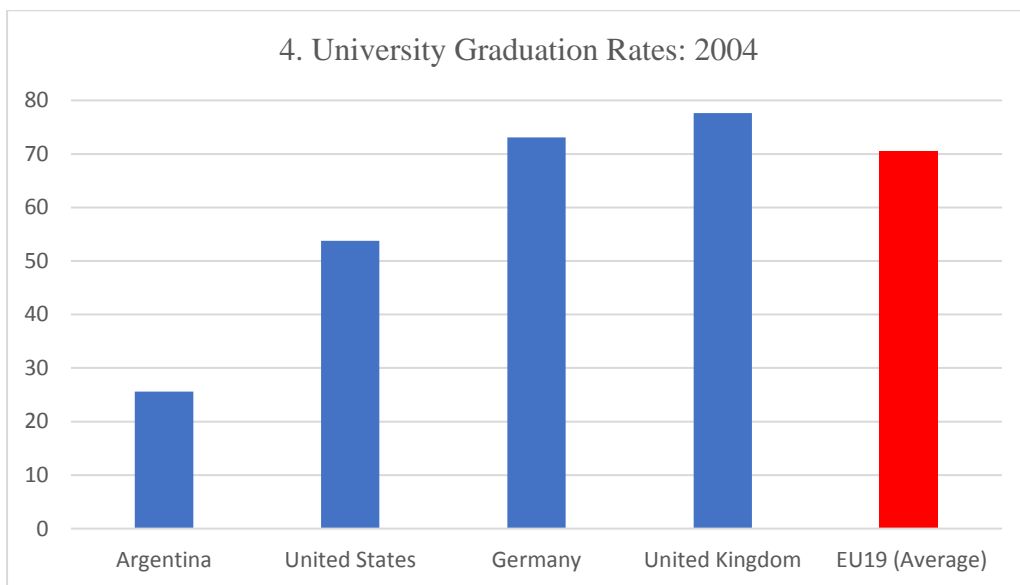
Source: UNESCO, 2016.

In other words, as can be seen in the graph above, university enrolment continued to expand throughout the last decades. The university system's overall performance, however, still yields contrasting results in relation to the countries used as a frame of reference. Far from expanding, graduation rates rather tended to fall.^v



Sources: Ministry of Education, 1975, 1992, 1996, 2007, 2013.

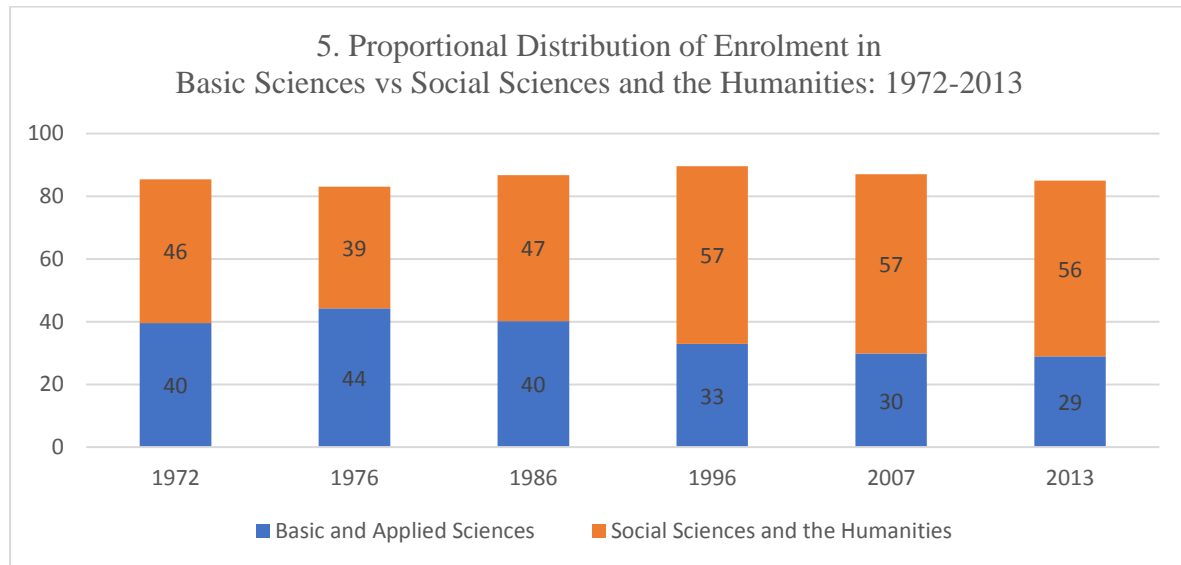
Consequently, said rate has moved further apart from the countries compared in the graph.^{vi}



Sources: Ministry of Education, 2007; OECD, 2007. OECD rates correspond to graduation from tertiary Type-A programmes (ISCED 5A).

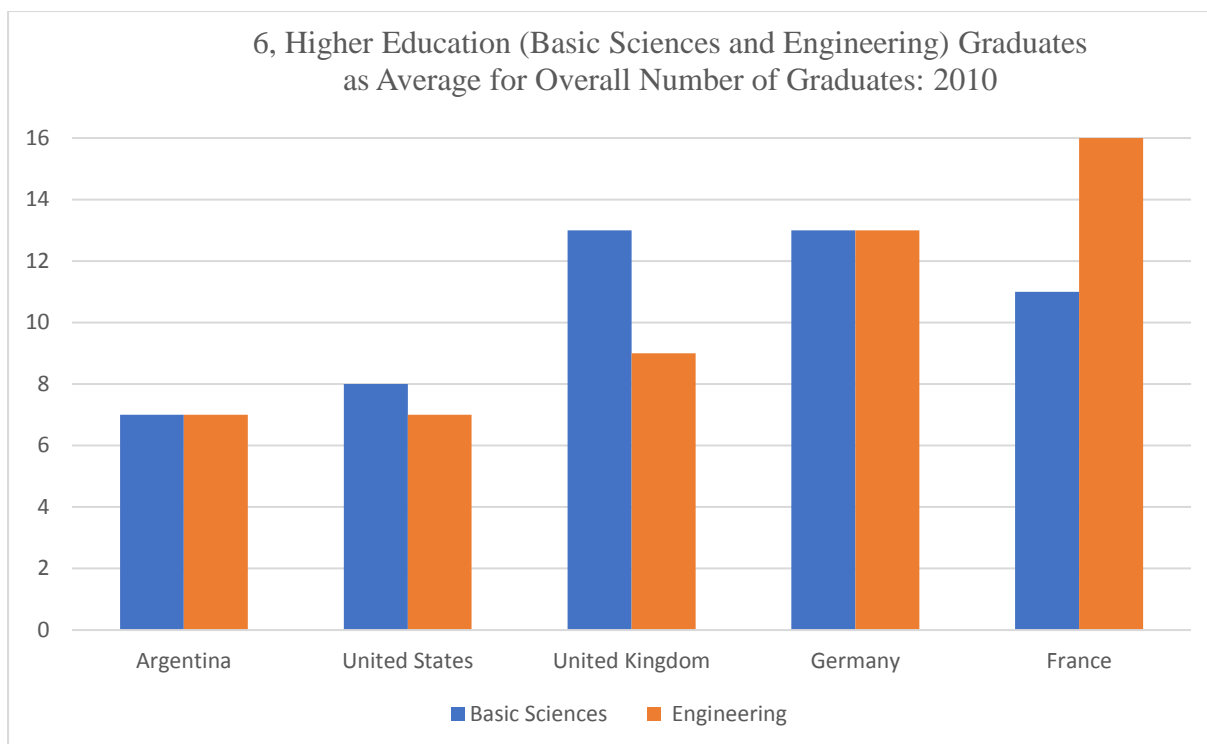
Similarly, efforts to redirect enrolment towards non-traditional degrees did not yield better results, despite the offer of new programmes being focused on other fields. As a matter of fact, Basic Sciences and Technology currently represent

40% of the overall degrees established between 1970 and the mid-1990s (García de Fanelli, 1995). Yet, in recent decades, the number of incoming students in these fields has experienced a sharp decrease compared to the recorded expansion in Social Sciences and the Humanities.^{vii}



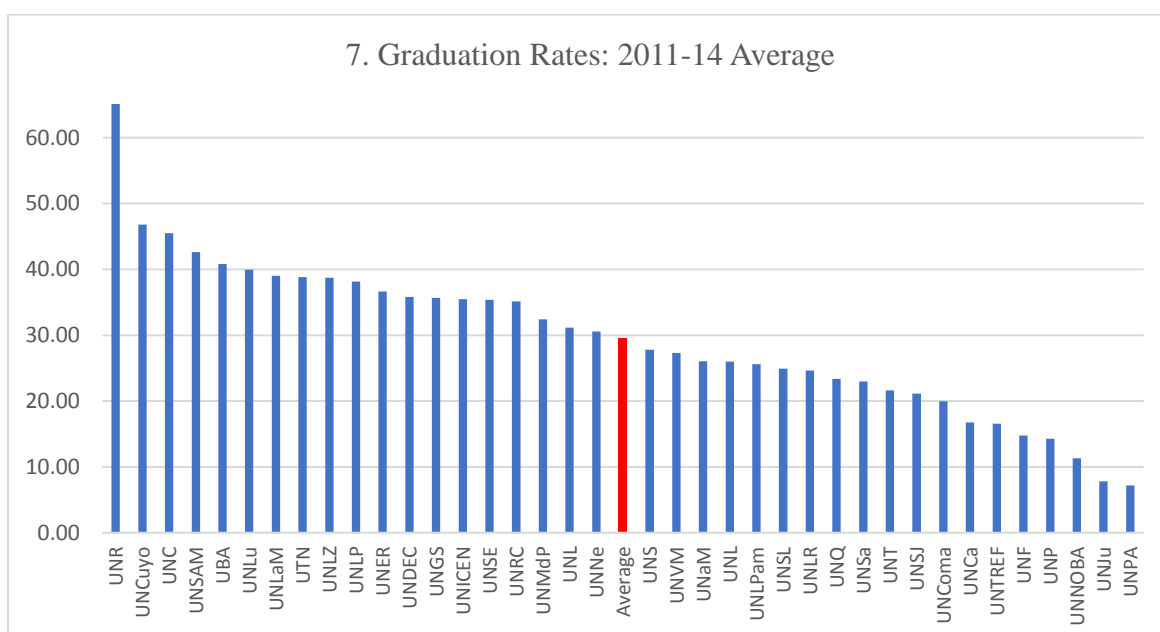
Sources: Cano, 1985; Ministry of Education, 1997, 2008, and 2014.

A similar result can be observed in the figures related to graduation from Basic Sciences and Engineering programmes, which were also boosted by the range of official policies to improve these rates due to their strategic significance. By 2015, the number of graduates in these fields was still considerably low in comparison with European countries (although the calculation for the United States is analogous). As a matter of fact, in 2010 the government implemented a financial aids program called “Becas Bicentenario” (renamed Science and Technology Grants). It was an awards funding for low-income students enrolled in degrees considered priority for the national economic plan, e.g. mostly in STEM fields (Chiroleu, 2009; García de Fanelli, 2015; Chiroleu, 2015; Ballerini, 2018)



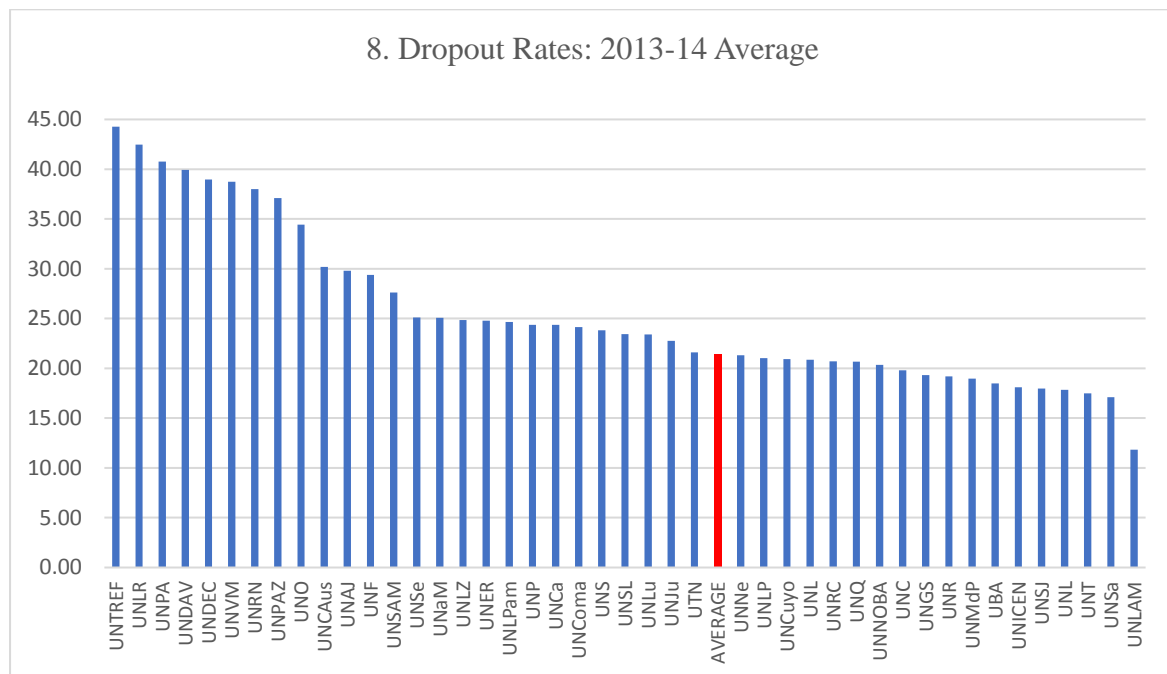
Source: UNESCO, 2016.

Therefore, the issues identified towards the end of the 1960s in relation to the overall performance of the university system were reproduced throughout the successive waves of expansion. Let us now move to those markers in a differential manner. First, the disaggregation of graduation rates demonstrates a high inter-university variability.^{viii}



Sources: Ministry of Education, 2008 and 2015.

The same can be observed in dropout rates.^{ix}



Source: Ministry of Education, 2015.

Certainly, the assessment of graduation and dropout rates does not suffice to account for the high variability in performance for the different universities.

Unfortunately, the statistical system does not offer further markers.

Other more indirect markers enable us to explain the high variability in performance and the characteristics of each university. As regards faculty staff, there is a huge variation between the number of part-time and full-time teaching duties, the level of education achieved, or the average number of students under charge, just to mention a few significant aspects to consider.

In short, the university system has not improved its overall performance when compared to those systems found in Western Europe and the United States, whereas the inter-university performance has acquired a high variability

throughout the expansion process. The expansion of the public university system in Argentina, thus, did not turn into a diversified system, at least not regarding the structures of the institutions, and still observe a high variability among them.

Recent Evolution of the Argentine University System

Deepening of the Differentiation as Content of the Expansion Process

Let us now analyse the content of the evolution of the Argentine university system. By the 1960s, the process of differentiation had already begun to take place within the university system. Prior to the first attempt at reform, it seemed evident that, by comparing the system's performance with that of other countries, the Argentine process of capital accumulation required only a relatively small fraction of the student body to obtain their diplomas and specialise in a specific field. As for the rest, it sufficed that their productive subjectivity was expanded over a shorter period of time than that necessary to complete a university programme; as a result, their level of specialisation was lower. This means that the differentiation in the education of workers whose productive subjectivity requires an expansion beyond what pertains the mandatory schooling period did not, in this case, take on the characteristic feature found in the United States and some Western European countries; namely, that of a higher education system spread over a wide range of institutions with restricted access. Instead, this process began to take shape within the existing university structure, evidenced in the discrepancy in graduation and dropout rates which, already by the 1960s, separated the average Argentine traditional universities from those belonging to the above-mentioned countries (Mendonça, Forthcoming). At the same time, enrolment concentrated around a small number of degrees.

In this way, the differentiation in Argentina's labour-power training initially crystallised through the distinctive level of progress in university attendance.^x

Until then, both private universities and non-university institutions kept a reduced enrolment quota (Del Bello, Barsky, & Giménez, 2007).

Successive attempts to reform the university system aimed at improving this performance. However, as we have observed, they only exacerbated this differentiation. In fact, after the institutional expansion, great differences emerged not only between graduation and dropout rates but also in the composition and working conditions of faculty staff, which impacted on the quality of education at different levels. Thus, if the former university structure already produced a kind of labour-power that differs in the level of progress of degree completion, the subsequent waves of expansion sharpened those differences. As Perna (2006) states, the result is a stratified higher education system in which each institution serves different social groups. In the United States, for example, a clear stratification can be found in the two-year colleges, where the students who attend are mostly low-income students. Eaton (1992) has defined this trend as an "educational segregation", that places students in different types of institutions regarding their race and/or class. In Argentina, on the contrary, tuition-free and open access public universities have been the core policy since the mid twentieth century (with political interruptions), but this has brought challenges regarding the tension between quality and inclusion.

Yet this process cannot be analysed without considering the transformation of other levels of the educational system. Particularly, it is worth noting that secondary education has also experienced a significant evolution in this differentiation process. Even though access to secondary education has globalised and the net rate of enrolment has widened, a deterioration process of a specific sector of public education has also taken place, turning it into a markedly heterogeneous system. In turn, as it has been noted, this heterogeneity

heavily influences the differential performance of freshmen university students, whose dropout rates turn out to be particularly high (Rosica & Gluz, 2011; Marquina & Pereyra, 2010; Chiroleu, 2018). This scenario allows us to argue that both the functioning and performance of some of the universities established throughout the different waves of expansion are linked to the deterioration of the conditions under which a fraction of the student body is trained in the public education system. Let us take, for instance, the case of Buenos Aires' suburbs, where 20 new universities were established in the last two waves of expansion. Some of them have been placed in low-income areas and have accomplished a moderate success in expanding enrolment towards this population, a greater part of which is composed by first-generation university students (Chiroleu & Marquina, 2017).^{xi} This has been achieved by turning to the above-mentioned strategies, such as the incorporation of admission courses, where students receive lessons aimed at compensating those deficiencies carried from previous education cycles and are invested with the required skills to study in a university programme.^{xii} Yet these courses have a relatively short duration (no longer than a four-month period), which poses the question as to whether these courses suffice to compensate for such deficiencies. If they do not, then it would be possible to think of these courses, and the early subjects, as a way in which students continue to develop their productive attributes so as to reach a level equal to the completion of non-deteriorated secondary school or to move further beyond it. In this regard, we should underscore that some of these universities have a higher dropout rate in the first year. This aspect is also reinforced by the fact that admission to third-wave institutions is absolutely unrestricted, in contrast to a large part of the remaining universities and to those established previously, which have different ways to limit enrolment—a fact that only deepens differentiation.^{xiii}

Labour-Power Demand and Differentiation in the Argentine Process of Capital Accumulation

Over the course of the last five decades, the successive waves of expansion of the university system gave way to a deepening in the differentiation of labour-power. Let us see, then, the contents of this process.

As we have argued above, capitalism continuously pushes for the development of productive forces through the production of relative surplus value (Marx, 2006 [1867]). It seems evident that this only occurs in a reduced number of national spaces, whereas other national spaces play different roles in the global unity of the capital accumulation process. Thus, several authors agree with the fact that the role of Latin American countries in the global economy is supplying of raw materials to the world market, especially to the so-called industrialised countries. It occurs that, as it is known, a series of natural conditions exist in those territories, which make the production of this type of commodities uniquely favourable. This results in a drop in individual production prices. However, these commodities are sold at the world market price. This results in extraordinary profits for capitalists, which end up being appropriated by the owners of the land in which they were produced as ground rent.

Nevertheless, as in most Latin American countries, Argentine landlords are not the only appropriators of ground rent. A portion of it feeds the valorisation of the most concentrated capitals in the industrial sector, which are mainly of foreign origin. But although in other countries these capitals operate within normal labour productivity levels and, therefore, on a normal scale, in Argentina they only produce for the reduced scale of the domestic market, using obsolete means of production. This determines, in turn, the appropriation of a smaller profit rate. One could think that this is not profitable for capital, yet here is

where the specific nature of the Argentine process of capital accumulation is revealed, since these capitals find several compensation sources. Among them, we can mention the appropriation of portions of ground-rent through economic policies set by the national state, such as currency overvaluation and export taxes on agrarian commodities. With these policies, the national state enables industrial capitals to appropriate the ground rent by different means: while currency overvaluation withholds a fraction of ground-rent in exchange mediation, which is later appropriated by industrial capitals by the cheapening of the imported means of production, tax exports affect a portion of the ground-rent of agrarian commodities, which is redirected to industrial capitals through policies such as subsidies, public loans at a negative interest rate, etc. At the same time, the value of labour-power is also cheapened, since the competition between agrarian capitals forces them to sell their commodities in the internal market also beneath its production price (Iñigo Carrera, 2006; Grinberg & Starosta, 2014; Caligaris, 2016). Hence, the process of differentiation of labour-power in Argentina is not only determined by the generic character of the production of relative surplus value but also by the specific character the accumulation of capital takes in this process.^{xiv} As a result, this differentiation presents a series of special characteristics.

When operating on a normal scale, that is, the scale required for the development of productive forces of labour, these capitals fragment the process of production across different national spaces on the basis of the global differentiation of labour-power. However, in countries like Argentina, they tend to carry out a rather integral part of production within the boundaries of the national territory. This means that the productive attributes of a fraction of the labour-power employed need to be expanded, albeit to a lesser degree than that required in the countries where such capitals operate on a normal scale (Cazón, Graña, Kozlowsky, & Lastra, 2018). Another portion of the Argentine economy

is formed by small capitals, which account for another significant fraction of the buying of labour-power. The degree of development of the productive subjectivity of this section of the working class oscillates between the minimum skills to operate in the simplest processes of production and the expansion of these capacities to the level required by the most concentrated capitals of that economy. Lastly, another significant fraction of the working population finds itself in abject poverty, and its reproduction is, to a large extent, subject to the existence of welfare policies (Cazón, Graña, Kozlowsky, & Lastra, 2018).

Progress in the differentiation of labour-power is linked to the development of this process of accumulation. As we have seen, the arrival of these portions of foreign capitals into the national economy influenced the general demand for labour-power to the point that it acquired a specific character around the 1960s, when this demand already displayed a tendency that made it stand out from countries where the development of productive forces was already taking place—the United States and some countries in Western Europe being clear examples of this. In Argentina, there was a sharp difference between the relatively high proportion of students and graduates from Social Sciences and the Humanities and the fields of Basic Sciences and Applied Sciences, as well as the relatively high proportion of students who were unable to graduate. We may argue that these characteristics are related to the technical backwardness that distinguishes industrial capitals and the fact that specificity in the Argentine process of capital accumulation prevents capital from fostering the development of the productive forces.

From the mid-1970s onwards, and coinciding with the end of the first wave of expansion, the Argentine process of capital accumulation reached its own limits, and its scale stagnated over the course of the following decades. One of the main consequences of this phenomenon was the increase of the surplus working

population, which was expressed in a rise in the unemployment rate (Iñigo Carrera, 2006).

Against this backdrop, the reproduction of a secondary education system which would develop evenly the productive attributes of the generality of the population became superfluous. Consequently, the differentiation initially took place on this educational level, deteriorating a sector of the public education system (Jacinto & Terigi, 2007; Tuñón & Halperín, 2010; Capellacci, Botinellu, Ginochio, & Lara, 2011).

In short, with the establishment of a great mass of surplus population, capital no longer required for the generality of the working class to develop the productive attributes which were formerly related to the completion of the school cycle. The shape taken by this process represented a deterioration of learning conditions for a large section of the population and, thus, of the development of their productive subjectivity. As Baldino & Cabral (2013) state, “if school is indeed a place of economic production, (...) it has to produce labour-power in the most efficient way: standardized quality, abundant amount and low cost” (2013, 70-71). In this case, however, the most efficient form under which this process was carried out was the deterioration of a portion of the education process, which became less standardized.

However, our surmise is that this process of deterioration went beyond its adequate extent. As a result, a fraction of this population currently needs to reach a higher development of its productive attributes, but cannot do it through the downgraded high school system. Their passage through university (in particular, through admission courses and the first years of their programmes) seems to be the most adequate way to catch up. For them, therefore, the partial progress into a university programme is the concrete form of developing their

productive subjectivity to a similar or higher level than the one corresponding to the completion of a non-deteriorated school cycle.

Certainly, the mere expansion of the university system does not suffice to drive this process. As we have already mentioned, the problems noted in the second half of the twentieth century kept on appearing despite the attempts at reform. Hence, since 2015, a large section of universities offer absolute, unrestricted access. Yet this does not seem to be enough either. As we have seen, in order to increase retention and graduation levels, universities also offer secondary school content review courses, tutoring systems, educational counselling, support activities, and different types of student aid. And, to increase the number of incoming students in the areas where they are based, these institutions have established linkage programmes with local schools, as well as information guidance about the degrees offered and the available systems of economic assistance (Chiroleu, 2018). The development of the productive subjectivity of a fraction of this population seems, indeed, to demand not only the creation of new universities but also the introduction of these policies.

Differentiation and Diversification in Higher Education

We had previously mentioned that the process of differentiation of labour-power took a specific shape in Argentina because, unlike what occurred in other countries, it originally developed within the public university system. Since the mid-1990s, however, and in tandem with the second wave of university expansion, the process of differentiation has acquired certain characteristics that liken it to other national systems of higher education.

Non-university tertiary institutions, which had quietly emerged in the 1970s, possessed a noteworthy level of expansion: between 1970 and 2000, their enrolment multiplied twelvefold, whereas university enrolment only increased

fivefold. In the last two decades, it even expanded at a more rapid pace. If at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the non-university tertiary system of education barely represented a quarter of the total enrolment in the higher education system (Alvarez & Dávila, 2005), by 2010 it had already reached 30% (Fernández Lamarra, 2018). Many of the students who currently abandon their university studies actually move towards this system. And, as the number of these institutions quickly spread, they did so with a particularity: unlike the university system, which centres its offer around the City of Buenos Aires and its suburban area (where, in 2005, 44% of public and 66% of private institutions were based), non-university institutions spread across the whole country (Alvarez & Dávila, 2005). We should also mention that private institutions have a lot of leverage in this system. Nevertheless, the stratification of their enrolment differs from the university scheme, for the number of students between the lowest and highest quintiles decreases over time (Fernández Lamarra, 2018). Finally, we should underscore the significant influence both technical and teaching degrees have within this system. Thus, its expansion has given rise to a higher education system that is greatly diversified. The opposite side of this process is represented in the scarce integration that exists between both subsystems, which has in turn defined the Argentine system of higher education as ‘binary’ (Mollis, 2007).

As for the university system, we should stress the fact that private universities kickstarted their expansion enrolment at a higher pace than their public counterparts, to the extent that the former currently represents a quarter of the total enrolment rate (Chiroleu, 2018). It is also less heterogeneous than the public system: for instance, in recent years, it has paved the way for the consolidation of *distance education*, which lacks regulations for quality assurance (Fernández Lamarra, 2018).

Although we are unable to directly link the new university models to those established in the above-mentioned countries, it is possible, however, to find similarities between their functioning structures and their academic offer. Hence, the brand-new higher education institutions in the public sector have organised into departments, institutes, and/or schools in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the traditional organisation by faculties. Their curricular offering also seems to resemble that of other foreign models, in particular when it comes to the possibility of obtaining an intermediate degree within two years and then continue until completing a long-term degree (an equivalent of associate's degree or certificate). However, the validity of short-term or undergraduate degrees offered by public universities is not at all clear. Although some of these are certified degrees, others are mere 'qualifying' degrees,^{xv} which rather attest to a number of courses passed by students, yet do not enable them to practise. An illustrative example is the degree of Social Work Technician obtained at the end of the third year of the bachelor's degree in one of these universities, which does not allow for professional registration and, as a result, the possibility to practise the profession, for which the completion of the cycle of studies is mandatory.

In sum, the process of institutional diversification exacerbated significantly the complexity of the university system in Argentina. To a large extent, the foundations upon which this diversification took place can be found in the foreign systems of higher education, particularly in the offer of intermediate degrees and curricular reorientation towards technical programmes, with a major focus on local development. Nevertheless, the outcome does not equate with the systems employed in those countries. To the contrary, it represents a *sui generis* system. On the one hand, the attempt to establish a binary system of higher university and non-university education, with the subsequent diversification of the academic offer in both subsystems, resulted in the

acquisition of markedly different characteristics from those in foreign countries. On the other hand, despite seeking to diversify their structures, academic offer, and curricula (by, for instance, allowing access to intermediate degrees), the public university system did not manage to truly stand out from old traditional universities. A noteworthy trait of the university system, however, has been its inter-university variability, which we have referred to above, as well as the increased prominence that private universities have achieved in recent decades.

Conclusion

Throughout this work, we have analysed the evolution of the Argentine higher education system over the last five decades, with a special emphasis on the transformations that have swept across the university subsystem. A significant aspect of this transformative process is that its quantitative expansion took place through several attempts at reform. Nevertheless, the outcome of those processes did not yield an improvement in the system's performance, particularly in regard to issues such as enrolment reorientation and graduation and dropout rates; rather, it ended up giving rise to three expansion waves. Yet, by examining intra-university performances, the existence of a greater variability becomes evident. On this basis, we have argued that the establishment of this pattern is also representative of one of the paths taken by labour-power differentiation in Argentina. Specifically, and based on the distinctive character of the Argentine process of capital accumulation, we have pointed out that the demand for labour-power determines the functioning and the characteristics of the university system, which shapes the productive subjectivity of workers in different ways: a fraction of the working class is able to expand that subjectivity by completing a university degree, whereas another fraction, whose magnitude seems highly significant compared to other university systems, begins an academic programme without being able to graduate.

The differentiation does not end—or, rather, does not begin—here. As we have argued above, the public system of secondary education experienced a partial deterioration process in recent decades whereby a growing number of individuals develops a significantly lower level of productive attributes. Despite this, the Argentine process of capital accumulation seems to be in demand for a higher number of individuals whose productive subjectivity resembles that of a graduate of a non-deteriorated secondary school. Hence, we may argue that some of the universities established during the successive waves of expansion may compensate for this educational gap, especially during the first academic year. On the other hand, the process of differentiation also began to take root outside the public university subsystem. This phenomenon is evidenced in the strengthening of the private university subsystem and the non-university tertiary subsystems, both public and private.

In sum, we may state that the successive waves of expansion have reproduced, to a larger scale, the same deficits ran by the very education system (García de Fanelli & Balán, 1994; Chiroleu & Marquina, 2015; Fernández Lamarra, 2018; Mendonça, 2018). Under this process, and as a result, a deepening of labour-power differentiation eventually took place.

Notes

ⁱ In the United States Between 1945 and 1975 the number of students enrolled in higher education increased from 1,677,000 to 11,185,000. This massification has been linked with the returning of the veterans to the country, and the enrolment of their children (St. John, 2013 in Ballerini, 2018).

ⁱⁱ The geographic area where the universities were created is called Conurbano. which comprises the suburbs of Buenos Aires city, and concentrate the 70% of the total province population. At the same time, it is one of the poorest areas, and most of its population is unemployed and live under the poverty line. That said, the creation of new universities in the Conurbano, both in the 1990's and between 2009 and 2015, represent a new policy regarding higher education. Most of the students that attend these universities are first generation, low-income students, adults and underprepared, and has challenged these institutions to take this into account and change some of their traditional structures.

ⁱⁱⁱ The universities of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Tucumán, La Plata, and Rosario are among the largest of their kind.

^{iv} Simultaneously, the creation of shorter degrees was also promoted within the non-university higher education system, which began to grow at a rapid pace. Likewise, this expansion phase gave way to the spread of private universities. We will refer to these phenomena later.

^v The calculation of the graduation rate can be made in different ways. By way of example, and based on the methodology used by the OECD (2017), we present here the quotient evolution between graduates and incoming students of six years ago (a period corresponding to the average period of years for the completion of university degree courses, at least before the increase in short-term degrees offer). Current statistics, however, only allow us to make this calculation for pre-1973 years. It is worth noting that the rate peaks correlate with those periods in which the repressive policies of *de facto* regimes (1966–73 and 1976–83) induced a fall in the number of existing and incoming students.

^{vi} As we have noted above, the OECD bases its graduation rate calculation upon the number of new enrolled students. Strictly speaking, this figure encompasses not only university degrees but also those pertaining to the whole system of higher education, with the exception of the so-called short-term tertiary programmes (2–3 years). The data depicted in this graph, therefore, does not exactly correlate with that in the previous graph (with a little more than 3 percentage points of difference), yet they are useful to establish a comparison.

^{vii} Note that the Basic Sciences field also includes ‘traditional’ degrees. Nevertheless, when analysing the subareas which have ‘priority’ programmes, markers do not seem to improve. For instance, despite efforts to expand enrolment, the degrees related to Agricultural Sciences only registered a meagre 3.5% enrolment rate in 1986. By 2013, this figure had fallen below 2% (Mendonça, 2018c).

^{viii} Given that the third wave of expansion came to an end in December 2015, we have chosen not to include newly established universities in our analysis nor in the graphs presented herein.

^{ix} The calculation of dropout rates corresponds to the division of the average number of non-re-enrolled students by the total number of students recorded for each of the previous years. Another possible marker of academic irregularity is represented in the number of re-enrolled students unable to pass courses during an academic year. On this topic, see the work by Chiroleu (2018), who makes this calculation in regard to selected universities.

^x Although, as we have seen, a large number of individuals who drop out of university do so before the completion of the first year of the degree, others move further in their education. In this sense, their education could be compared to the one offered by, for instance, certain American *colleges* (or ‘academic minors’) whereby those who graduate from the secondary education system receive two more years of education which, despite dealing with general contents, are oriented towards a specific field.

^{xi} Nevertheless, the gap concerning the higher strata of society is still quite broad, and the constituting population has expanded its enrolment to a greater extent. See García de Fanelli (2016) and Chiroleu (2018).

^{xii} These are courses where some of the basic questions regarding university functioning are explained, coupled with other courses aimed at consolidating or developing contents and skills that the bulk of former secondary school graduates used to possess, ranging from reading comprehension to basic knowledge of subjects such as Mathematics (García de Fanelli, 2016; Chiroleu, 2018; Fernández Lamarra, 2018). Likewise, it is worth noting that these are compulsory courses, albeit their passing is not required for degree admission; in fact, the only requirement imposed to students is merely their attendance.

^{xiii} Despite all these policies, recent studies have been questioning the results of the tuition-free and open-access system in Argentina. The critiques state that the tuition-free model favours inclusion in terms of access, but the low rate of graduates results in the exclusion of those who do not complete their degrees.

In terms of Ezcurra (2011) Argentina's higher education main characteristic is an "exclusive inclusion". This phenomenon has brought the attention of a number of scholars, especially after the creation of new universities in the Buenos Aires outskirts. As already mentioned, these universities serve a large proportion of low-income and first generation-students. As Ballerini (2018) states, although targeted policies have been the norm in the United States, in Argentina there is a new agenda in that direction.

^{xiv} This is also present in many other Latin American countries. For an analysis of some cases along these lines, see, among others, Grinberg and Starosta (2014), Caligaris (2016), Dachevsky and Kornbliht (2017), and Fitzsimons and Starosta (2018).

^{xv} In some universities they are called 'encouragement degrees', and they are meant to encourage the students to complete the full programme.

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