

Venezuela: Higher Education For All

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Abstract

This paper is a first approximation to the higher education (HE) reforms currently under way in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Under Hugo Chávez' presidency, free HE has become a constitutional right, implemented via the two recently created national HE programmes Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela and Misión Sucre. Based on policy documents, government reports, interviews and observation, we explore the strategic role ascribed to HE in the government's pursuance of economic, political, social and cultural transformation towards a 'Socialism of the 21st Century'. What we term 'higher education for all' (HEFA) is occurring exactly at a time when the commodification and privatisation of HE is pushed ahead on a global scale. Throughout the paper we argue that Venezuelan HE policy and practice constitute a counter-hegemonic effort to the prevalent global HE agenda.

Keywords: Educational Policy; Higher Education; Globalization of Education; Neoliberalism; Revolution; Socialism

Introduction

Since Hugo R. Chávez Frías' election as president of Venezuela in 1998, he and the 'Bolivarian Revolution' have been the source of much controversy: while *chavistas* view the "re-founding of the Republic" – based on a new constitution and the re-naming of the country into the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela¹ (the 'Fifth Republic') – as a move towards a social and inclusive participatory democracy, the

old elite minority opposition, who can count on considerable resources to amplify their voice, categorically objects all new policies, arguing Venezuela is heading towards an autocratic regime. This confrontation has penetrated virtually all areas of Venezuelan politics, with education being one of the most contested terrains.

The 'education controversy' largely originates in the vital role the Bolivarian government has ascribed to education. On one hand, sectors of the opposition argue that the government's employment of education as a key instrument to achieve the societal transformations as envisaged in the 1999 Constitution would signify an "excessive" ideologisation of education. On the other hand, the government's intention to repay the "social debt" accumulated under the previous administrations manifests itself in a 288% increase of the education budget between 2001 and 2005, now making up 14-15% of total government spending. Simultaneously, fractions of the middle and upper classes claim that the consequent substantial expansion of education - above all at the higher education level - would decrease the quality of education. Their discourse, however, rather suggests that they perceive themselves as increasingly deprived of one of the previous, major distinguishing elements: the privilege of higher education (HE).

There are at least three elements discernible in the Bolivarian education strategy: firstly, the educational transformations are philosophically guided by people's empowerment in order to become subjects in their own as well as their nation's "endogenous development". Secondly, policies of provision draw on a 'two-pronged approach', where a Bolivarian school system is complemented by temporary emergency programmes, called *misiones* (missions).² Finally, contrary to the dominant discourse of "Education For All" (EFA) – according to which public resources should concentrate on the primary sub-sector – the constitutional right to free education includes the right to free HE. Such promotion of 'Higher Education For All' (HEFA) is occurring exactly at a time when the commodification and privatisation of HE is pushed ahead on a global scale.

We here focus on *Misión Sucre*³ and *Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela* (UBV) as the icons of Bolivarian HE transformation. Their central objectives are a) to construct a national HE system geared towards "integral" and "sustainable" human

development; and b) to promote social justice through the inclusion of those historically excluded from HE. Both programmes were launched in 2003 and are coordinated from within the Higher Education Ministry (*Ministerio de Educación Superior*, MES). However, in September 2005 *Misión Sucre* was academically integrated into UBV, leaving the former with primarily administrative responsibilities.

Our principal sources of knowledge are interviews with educators and education policy-makers as well as official documents of Bolivarian policy proposals and discourses.⁴ However, this study neither constitutes an exhaustive empirical contrasting of discourses and their practical implementation, nor is it meant to be an evaluation of current policies and programmes. Rather, our objective is to provide a first broad approximation to the educational innovations in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

The chapter contains three main sections: firstly, a (necessarily selective) historical overview of the socio-political and educational context will, secondly, lead into an elaboration of the strategic role ascribed to education in the Fifth Republic. In the third section we draw attention to the main characteristics and implications of the HEFA reform. Our line of argument is that these policies constitute a clear divorce from the hegemonic global HE agenda.

Historical and socio-political context

Much of the discourse on Venezuela has characterised the pre-Chávez era (the ‘Fourth Republic’, 1958-1998) as Latin America’s “most stable democracy” (e.g. Ellner, 2003; Hellinger, 2003) while, simultaneously, both national and international oppositional forces have framed Chávez as a “vainglorious dictator”, “populist”, or even “terrorist”.⁵ Alternatively, Michael Derham’s cogent analysis of Venezuela’s recent history arrives at the conclusion that Fourth Republic exclusionary ‘democracy’ “was never democratic and was never meant to be”, and that it would have to be the corrupt, clientelist and incompetent governments of the Fourth Republic regime against which the Bolivarian administration would have to be measured (Derham, 2002a: 193; 2002b).

Reference to social, political and economic exclusion helps to understand Chávez' popularity, which manifests itself in his administration's ten consecutive electoral victories since 1998, each won with an absolute majority of around 60% of the votes. As Gregory Wilpert (2003) observes, "the poor represent Chávez' most important constituency", which explains why social apartheid has become the most important political issue under Chávez. Large-scale structural impoverishment began to spread with the end of the brief oil boom of the 1970s, and was aggravated through 'Washington consensus' policies (Williamson, 1993), imposed on the people from 1989 on by Chávez' predecessors Carlos Andrés Pérez and Rafael Caldera. Both had been elected on an explicitly anti-neo-liberal platform, thus lacking the popular mandate for such policies, which led to violent reaction by the popular sectors (the "*Caracazo*"). The army, including officers pertaining to Colonel Chávez' Bolivarian conspiracy, had received order to shoot at the protesters, which cost the lives of several thousand protesters (Gott, 2005). It was the massacring of the popular uprising which accelerated the 1992 "military rebellion" under Chávez' leadership, generally referred to, and politically exploited, as a failed "coup d'etat", which according to Chávez had pursued a restoration of democracy (Chávez Frías, 2005).

According to income-based estimates, between 1975 and 1997 poverty increased from about 33% to 67%, with the 'middle class' shrinking from 60% to 31% (Riutort, 1999).⁶ By 1998, income distribution had deteriorated to the 1970 level, when the poorest fifth of Venezuelans received 3% of income compared to 53-54% of the richest quintile (World Bank, 1979; 2003). As Buxton (2003: 113) aptly states, Pérez "undermined the crude legitimacy equation institutionalized in 1958 under which a limited form of democracy was installed with a guarantee of economic distribution to all social classes". Thus, the ubiquitous social and political polarisation in the country, repeatedly blamed on Chávez' political agenda (e.g. Shannon, 2005), is not a phenomenon so recent at all. Rather, "social schism" re-emerged with the failure of Fourth Republic 'democracy' and was re-politicised under Chávez. This re-politicisation of the "elite-mass cleavage" did not follow strict class lines and has embraced the historically unorganised poor (Roberts, 2003).

"Re-founding" the Republic meant to reform the 1961 Constitution, as had been under consideration since the 1980s (Marapacuto, 2005). The new 1999 Constitution of the

Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (CBRV, 2000) - according to David Raby (2005: 11) "one of the most advanced in the world in terms of entrenchment of human rights and citizen participation" - was legitimated through several electoral processes and constitutes a legal and normative framework for social justice. In blocking privatisation (Gott, 2005: 251), thus neo-liberal capitalism, the CBRV bears an alternative model which has entered the Bolivarian discourse as "Socialism of the 21st Century".

The new education paradigm is firmly embedded in the CBRV, which implicitly and explicitly incorporates major human rights instruments, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the 1995 Declaration on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy. Other normative instruments include the 1990 EFA Declaration, the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century (UNESCO, 1998; henceforth WDHE). Accordingly, Articles 102 and 103 of the CBRV define "permanent integral quality education" as an essential root of democracy, a human right and a "public service" for whose provision the State assumes primary responsibility at all levels and for all its forms. Education is geared towards the full development of the personality in order to live a decent life, accompanied by an ethical evaluation of work and an awareness of (organised) civic participation in decision-making. To ensure equal opportunities, state-provided education is obligatory from the nursery to the medium diversified level (age 17), and *free* up to the (undergraduate) university level.

The above allows the following suggestions: firstly, the Bolivarian constitution unequivocally challenges the dominant World Bank discourse, where "basic education for all" has been perverted into poor children's access to minimalist 4-6 year primary schooling and functional basic skills acquisition for labour purposes (World Bank, 1995; 1999a; Torres, 1999). Simultaneously, whilst the globalised post-Jomtien EFA policies and programmes have been aligned to "*preserving* and *improving*" 'the traditional', Venezuela has taken up the challenge of "*rethinking* and *transforming*" (cf Torres, 1999: 17; italics original). Secondly, although the legal tools for free state-provided basic education also existed in the Fourth Republic⁷, they were inefficiently put into effect. Despite a number of small-scale literacy programmes

between 1958 and 1996 – often financed by the banking and industrial sectors, within a modernisation rationale and for narrow economic ends (RBV/PDVSA, 2005a; MCI, 2005a) – 6.12% of Venezuelans were illiterate in 2001, shortly before the inception of the *Misión Robinson I* literacy campaign. And, thirdly, Venezuelan education legislation transcends the MDGs, which omit the possibility of the poor to access HE.⁸ Therefore, contemporary Venezuela does not only comply significantly more with human rights, but implicitly sets new international standards.

As the worldwide achievement of the MDGs is becoming increasingly illusionary (Social Watch, 2005), Venezuela was declared illiteracy-free on 28th October 2005, and universal basic education (9 years) is expected to be achieved by 2007. As a continuation of *Misión Robinson I*, *Misión Robinson II* provides basic education up to 6th grade, and the recently initiated *Misión Robinson III* consolidates functional literacy in combination with the creation of production units. *Misión Ribas* makes up for the accumulated deficit in secondary education and, as stated, UBV/*Misión Sucre* provide free HEFA (MCI, 2005b), first and foremost for the most impoverished and traditionally excluded sectors of the population.

The aim to fight poverty through education - as pursued by Venezuela – is in itself not a new strategy. After all, focused education programmes proliferated in Latin America during the 1990s under the leadership of international financial institutions (World Bank etc.). Those programmes, however, are firmly rooted in human capital and individualistic empowerment theories, i.e. equipping the most impoverished pupils and their households with the tools, abilities and competencies in order to integrate themselves into society in an individualised manner (Rambla et al, 2005). Although the Bolivarian strategy shares some of these elements, ideologically it follows the logic of collective empowerment, to be realised through an educational process where individuals develop a critical understanding of their environment and get involved in the solution of the problems that affect them in an organised way.⁹ In other words, education becomes a means for organisation in order to construct an inclusive society, rather than an instrument to include uncritical individuals into the status quo. The following section illustrates this model within the Venezuelan context.

The role of education in the Bolivarian Revolution

In order to create a new country it is fundamental to revolutionise the entire ideological system, that is, it is indispensable to take the revolution to the culture and education.

The educational transformation in Venezuela is intrinsically linked to the construction of a new national project characterised by endogenous development, a more egalitarian social structure, political sovereignty and a higher grade of independence from the centres of the world system. Advancement towards this societal model, referred to as Socialism of the 21st Century, is driven by a strategic plan (MCI, 2004) which contains ten objectives, of which we highlight those for whose achievement education generally, and HE in particular, assume pivotal roles:

- *To advance the configuration of the new social structure.* As the MES argues, re-founding the Republic "involves taking the country towards a maximisation of collective well-being, which entails a fair distribution of the wealth", and where "education and work [are] the fundamental processes to achieve this, as well as the protection and the promotion of the social economy as [the] essential strategy". Consequently, in order to change the present social structure, a necessary - but in itself insufficient - condition is to guarantee universal access to all levels of education. Rather than being exclusively oriented to work purposes, education should first serve the empowerment of the people.
- *To rapidly advance the construction of the new popular participatory democratic model.* Bolivarian education is of paramount importance to achieve a "protagonistic" democracy, for which reason education for participation and citizenship is integral to the curriculum. Above all, however, it is aspired to encourage participation from a "situated perspective", which means to guarantee the participation of the pupils and other agents in the management of the educational institutions, alongside participatory methodologies, pedagogies and professional practices.
- *To accelerate the creation of a new State apparatus institutionalism.* This objective is related to, firstly, the de-bureaucratisation of the State and the

development of public policies characterised by citizen participation and joint responsibility - in the process of design, implementation, and the control of policies. In HE, this new paradigm of institutionalism materialises above all in the project of municipalización (municipalisation). And, secondly, the eradication of corruption in the State apparatus, where HE should contribute to the education of professionals and civil servants committed to the common interest and who have a strong sense of the public and the collective.

- *To accelerate the construction of the new production model towards the creation of the new economic system.* Central to this new production model is the concept of endogenous development, i.e. the creation and consolidation of a diversified, efficient and progressively self-sufficient national productive structure. As a precondition, the full inclusion of the people in the dynamics of development, as well as a professional model outside the framework of traditional HE institutions, is required. This is aimed to be realised via the various social and educational missions and considered to be an un-bureaucratic "revolutionary model of public policies" (MCI, 2005a). Contrary to traditional welfare programmes, which did exist in the Fourth Republic in the 1970s, the missions are un-bureaucratic and, as both a process and a system of inclusion, they combine short-term poverty alleviation and inclusion with long-term structural transformation (MED, 2004: 125). The 'new' professionals as envisaged by Bolivarian HE should be responsive to the needs of the most impoverished communities, promote a social economy, and contribute to the diversification of production in order to counteract the country's oil-dependency.
- *To continue installing the new territorial structure.* In order to level out inherited territorial disparities, public utilities planning - in our case HE planning - involves the de-concentration of HE institutes, traditionally concentrated in the urban centres. In response to structural exclusion from HE of (often) rural populaces, as well as their uprooting when having to move to 'the city', the Bolivarian government is municipalising HE.
- *To continue driving the new international multi-polar system.* In order to reverse international power imbalances and dependency vice-minister of Culture for Human Development, Héctor Soto, considers it "necessary to promote an alternative educative-cultural project [...] within an integrationist

geo-political conception of the Latin American countries, which allows us to face up to the colonialist globalisation project from a position of strength” . Consequently, HE programmes respond to the economic strategy of countering dynamics of dependency with respect to the world powers, just as curriculum contents allow students to analyse local problems from a global perspective¹⁰. On the other hand, educational internationalisation projects form part of the counter-hegemonic, regional integration proposal.

The above-stated points demonstrate that nourishing people's commitment to the revolutionary processes is a declared objective of Bolivarian education. This is further reflected in the employed pedagogies and methodologies, which are based on andragogical principles for a liberating and emancipatory education. As Chávez, in paraphrasing Paulo Freire, confirms: "the act of reading and studying is a liberating act, education is liberating, let's go then, go ahead with education, towards the liberation of our people" (MES, 2005: 10). Therefore, the Bolivarian education system can be considered to be directed against any form of discrimination and economic dominance between individuals and social classes, i.e. "against the capitalist order which invented the aberration of misery and abundance" (Freire cited in MC, 2005).

It is worth noting, though, that the government's statement of the political dimension of education has unleashed ample criticism by the oppositional sectors, on grounds of a "lack of neutrality" and "excessive ideologisation". Such sources disregard that the dominant education model is susceptible to similar criticism. Nor do they consider that certain ideologies are becoming naturalised or more invisible due to the fact that they are hegemonic, which does not make them less ideological or more neutral.¹¹ In this respect, we would agree with Robert Arnove (1986: 23) who considers that "some of those who object to political propagandizing [...] see the messages as indoctrination only when they are in conflict with their own personally held convictions or ideology".

Breaking with the fatalism of market-driven reforms in HE

University education is as necessary as was middle school 50 years ago. Today, a secondary school graduate cannot get by, s/he has to be at least Bachelor. (Andrés Eloy Ruiz, Director UBV, cited in RNV, 2005)

Expansion of free public HE

One of the major recent global trends in education has been the curbing - or relative reduction - of public monies to HE, which has provided a fertile ground for the expansion of private education. In fact, many reforms implemented in the 1990s actively promoted private sector involvement in education. Therefore, a number of measures to limit access to public universities were taken: the increase of fees or the introduction of restricted entry to push excluded students into private universities; the subsidy of private institutions and the granting of fiscal incentives to companies that provide education services; tax relief to those citizens who consume private education, etc.

The growth of the private sector has most markedly occurred at the HE level.¹² This tendency is even more pronounced in the South, where World Bank programmes and companies, such as *Edinvest* or the International Finance Corporation (IFC)¹³ encourage private sector involvement. In turn, the World Bank reports and papers produced by Bank-affiliated researchers explicitly recommend the deepening of the privatisation of education in the South.¹⁴ Correspondingly, in Latin America, the number of private education providers has increased most dramatically in the past decades (World Bank, 1999b). Currently, private sector enrolment claims an average 38%¹⁵, in a region where government subsidies to private universities has become the custom. The increase of providers, however, has not always involved better quality. Some of the new institutions have been characterised as “diploma mills” of such low prestige that they only attract students from families with the lowest incomes.

Venezuela is not an exception with regard to the increase of private HE provision in the 1990s: between 1993 and 1999, private HE enrolment climbed from 34,5% of total enrolment to 43,9%¹⁶, which is considerably above the regional average.

Nevertheless, this trend has been reversed in the past few years, as four public universities have been created since 1999, of which UBV is the most significant, together with five technical university institutes (IUTs).¹⁷ Considering the municipalised UBV/Misión Sucre education spaces, it is suggested that the Venezuelan State is attempting to give a direct reply to the growing demand of HE, unlike most other countries where the market ideology has remained unbroken.

Moreover, in the 1990s, many countries started to introduce policies that favoured private HE financing through graduate taxes, the raising of enrolment rates, or the replacement of studentships through student loans. As a result, many previously free public Latin American universities have turned towards models of mixed financing . In the South, the situation is generally exacerbated by budgetary constraints related to an already smaller public (education) budget and debt-servicing, which often supersedes education and health spending together.¹⁸ Moreover, educational under-funding has been aggravated due to the implementation of neo-liberal structural adjustment policies (SAPs) . Consequently, public education investment in Latin America is eight times less than in the OECD countries.

The simultaneous shift of public resources from the tertiary to lower levels of education in many countries of the South has been justified with such arguments as: the lower levels are more in need; HE rates of return are lower than those of other levels; HE is too expensive; or the under-use of classroom-space in universities . Another common argument for cutting public funding at that level is that the middle and upper classes would be the main beneficiaries of HE. Although this argument is sustained by empirical evidence, it ensues clearly perverse social implications as the withdrawal of the State from HE further aggravates inequality.

Contrary to these trends, and driven by the guarantee of equal access to all levels, the Bolivarian government is investing significantly in *all* educational levels. In order to correct the previous negligence of public HE funding, public spending to the sector has increased dramatically, as illustrated in the following chart¹⁹:

Source: Sistema Integrado de Indicadores Sociales para Venezuela
(www.sisov.mpd.gov.ve)

Democratisation of access

In recent years, access to HE has increased in many countries worldwide, most notably in Europe and North America, where gross enrolment approaches 60%, compared to 28% in Latin America. Although HE intake has increased ten percentage points in Europe, and seven percentage points in both North and Latin America over the past few years²⁰, this does not necessarily mean that the capacities of HE systems have been capable of absorbing the total demand.

The Venezuelan case is paradigmatic in this respect. There, Fourth Republic underfunding of public HE manifested itself in supply not being able to meet the demand, conjoined with the privatisation of HE. Between 1984 and 1998, applications for HE rose 56%, while admission only increased 30%. Although total absolute intake climbed from 54.087 students in 1984 to 70.348 in 1998, the share of public universities decreased: only 27.999 students entered public HE in 1998, compared to 38.590 fourteen years earlier. Put differently, in 1984 only 29% of admitted students entered private universities, compared to 60% in 1998 (percentages derived from MES, 2005: 16).

Table 1: HE attendance of 20-24-year-olds according to social class (in %)

	1981	1997	2002
Quintile 1 (poorest)	28.5	16.4	20.8
Quintile 2	23.7	20.0	27.8
Quintile 3	23.9	24.5	29.7
Quintile 4	25.9	31.1	39.3
Quintile 5 (richest)	33.3	43.8	54.7

Source: derived from Cepal, 2005.

Table 1 illustrates three trends which legitimate UBV/Misión Sucre: firstly, between 1981 and 1997, the share of HE participation of the poorest 20% decreased dramatically, while access of Quintile 2 decreased almost 4 percentage points; that of Quintile 3 virtually stagnated over that period. Quintiles 4 and 5 could increase university attendance. Secondly, comparing Quintile 1 with Quintile 5, inequality between these two sectors of Venezuelan society increased from 4.8 percentage points

in 1981 to 27.4 percentage points in 1997, and reached a historical climax of 33.9 percentage points in 2002. Thirdly, although between 1997 and 2002 - under Chávez - *all* social classes enjoyed an increase in access to HE, it were the wealthiest 20% who, with an increase of 10.9 percentage points, were the absolute 'winners'. This counter-argues the elite's insistence upon being the overall victims of the Bolivarian Revolution.

To comply with the constitutional right to free HE, Bolivarian HE policies have concentrated on augmenting provision and on introducing the equality-increasing University Initiation Programme (PIU, *Programa de Iniciación Universitaria*), a 20-week course designed to enable prospective students to get (re-)accustomed to studying and to revise indispensable knowledge in several key areas.

The “democratization of access” to HE has meant that out of an estimated 400.000 *bachilleres*²¹ excluded from HE in 2003 (RBV, 2003), over 318.000 were incorporated in Misión Sucre by October 2005. With about 600.000 upcoming Misión Ribas graduates this figure is expected to reach one million by the end of 2006. Over 80.000 active scholarships of approximately US\$80 each have been granted to compensate for opportunity costs, and students receive tokens for free public transport.²² UBV had, in August 2005, 27.000 students in the four UBV “nuclei” (Caracas, Falcón, Ciudad Bolívar, Maracaibo)²³. Two-thirds of the students in 2004 were women. Castellano (cited in Castellano & Podur, 2004) states that 77% of UBV students come from poor backgrounds, and 17% from the lower middle class. The problem of drop-out is not reduced to ‘student failure’, but takes into account the institution’s responsibility of the phenomenon, which includes methodological and structural considerations. As regards the latter, both programmes have flexible timetables (e.g. evening and weekend classes) in order to permit the participation of populations from sectors with distinct, often work- and family-related life situations. HE *For All* in contemporary Venezuela means that any *bachiller* who *wants* to enter and/or continue university studies is entitled and actively supported to doing so. In this sense, ‘meritocracy’ – i.e. education by aptitude, ability and age (Brown, 1990) as universalized through the UDHR (Article 26) and the WDHE, is literally put into effect. Ideologically, however, Bolivarian HE policies supersede Fourth Republic meritocracy (CRV, 1961, Article 78) in two respects: firstly, as the statistics on the

privatisation of HE above demonstrate, Fourth Republic meritocracy increasingly resembled a 'parentocracy', i.e. free market and parental choice policies (see Brown, 1990). The poor, deprived of the means for 'choice', were excluded. And, secondly, since 'merit' is commonly measured through examinations, in this case primarily internal university entry examinations (Leal, 2004a), competitors from poor backgrounds were systematically excluded as they a) came from 'second class' public schools, thus stood little chance to pass entry examinations compared to the wealthy from private institutions who b) could afford special preparatory classes.²⁴ 'Meritocracy' thus legitimised severe discrimination (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Quite to the contrary, Bolivarian education policies explicitly aim to unite the two ethical and political imperatives of universality and equity in order to construct equity as an exercise of revolutionary governability (RBV/PDVSA, 2005b).

HEFA differs from European (post-second world war) liberal-democratic massification in that the primary motivation is not individual social mobility, but empowerment and endogenous development. Such universalisation neither means the creation of just another educational elite separated from the population nor increasing the number of universities. Rather, as Maria Ejilda Castellano, ex-director of UBV states, HEFA can only be achieved through an "integrated national system" (Castellano & Podur, 2004). Essential to this is that students are not alienated from their socio-geographical space - a major feature of Bolivarian *municipalización*.

***Municipalización*: a challenge to finance-driven decentralisation**

Bolivarian *municipalización* - the 'municipalisation' of HE - is profoundly distinct from 'municipalisation' as conceptualised by Burki et al (1999), who identify municipalisation together with 'school autonomy' as the two major decentralisation models. In accordance with the neo-liberal orthodoxy, these forms of decentralisation have meant a transfer of fiscal and administrative responsibilities to either lower levels of government or to individual schools for cost-saving and efficiency purposes. Under the guise of promoting democracy, these institutional reforms served to implement, or impose, the Washington Consensus policies within the context of SAPs (Samoff, 1994). As essentially "finance-driven" reforms, decentralisation in that sense first and foremost pursues a shift of the cost of education to the "users" through

privatisation, simultaneously instrumentalising 'participation' as pecuniary and non-pecuniary household/community contributions (Carnoy, 1999).

Municipalización, to the contrary, is a distinct, two-dimensional form of decentralisation: on one hand, it is concerned with the democratisation of HE as it geographically de-concentrates the traditional university infrastructure and takes the university to where the people are. By August 2005, 312 out of the 335 municipalities had been reached, as well as factories and prisons. For instance, the Bolivarian Worker's University, currently predominantly operating in the state-owned oil company PDVSA, pursues a reversal of capitalist unequal relations of production as workers acquire the education necessary to take shared collective-State leadership in the company. Expanding HE to all social environments contributes to the pursued "territorial equilibrium", i.e. harmonic development across the entire territory at the demographic, productive and environmental levels. Operationally, this is done through the creation of integral and permanent municipal education spaces called *Aldeas Universitarias* ("university villages"). Although UBV/Misión Sucre currently overwhelmingly use already existing infrastructure (schools, unused office buildings etc.), new standardised *aldeas* are increasingly being constructed throughout the country.²⁵ In this sense, *municipalización* counters the 'Plan Atcon' strategy of isolating universities from the rest of society (on remote campuses) in order to prevent student-community interaction.²⁶

On the other hand, *municipalización* intends to immerse HE in concrete contextual geographies (geo-spatial, geo-historical, geo-social, geo-cultural, geo-economic) (MES, 2005). As we have argued, Bolivarian HEFA aims to form critical and socially committed professionals and is not driven by an economicist 'efficiency' rationale, nor is it a 'specialisation for the market'. It is for endogenous and sustainable development, which involves transforming the "welfare culture" into a "local participatory culture" (Uzcátegui González, 2005). Breaking with the traditional university paradigm is essential for such processes. For instance, students of Integral Community Medicine are educated directly in the community, where they work with the local *Misión Barrio Adentro* doctors and become sensitised to the problems and needs of their environment.

Contents, methodology & methods

Another ‘global consensus’ discernible in the dominant HE and Lifelong Learning discourses is the subjugation of education to the (global) market needs or, in Stephen Ball’s (1998: 122) words, “the increasing colonisation of education policy by economic policy imperatives”. It is then the business sector that tends to set the priorities for public knowledge, mirrored in the curriculum (e.g. ‘skills’ and ‘competencies’²⁷) and investigation agendas (Popkewitz, 1994). Consequently, the predominance of instrumental skills and competencies acquisition subordinates and marginalises knowledges and contents which are not directly exploitable in the capitalist economy.

As Bolivarian HE aspires to transcend the prevalent paradigm, the fundamental principle of holistic and integral education expresses itself in the transdisciplinary nature of the study programmes. Transdisciplinarity allows knowledge construction through opening up relationships between individual disciplines and therefore is sensitive to the complexity of the processes studied (Bolívar et al, 2003). The approach evidently counters the “fragmentation of knowledge” and narrow specialisation inherent in the traditional faculty mode. For instance, the study programme *Social Management for Local Development* combines elements of sociology, social work, psychology, economics and geography.²⁸ Moreover, a pedagogy of horizontality is pursued. That is, dialogical, democratic subject-subject relationships, both between students and university teachers as well as the university and the communities. In the Freirean sense, as we could observe on numerous occasions, the (university) teacher becomes a motivator, facilitator and learner, in order to counter the “teacher-student contradiction” leading to the objectification of learners, as our interviewees viewed to be the case with traditional HE in Venezuela. Symbolically, this is put into practice via a circular seating arrangement in the seminar room, which constitutes an innovation within a context of institutionalised ‘upper-lower’ relationships.

The process of “dialogical and transformatory education” includes ‘dialogue with the self’ (UBV, 2003), for instance students writing their autobiography which, as an educational sociologist put it, “allows them to get to know themselves very well, to go

into themselves, to find out who s/he is, where s/he comes from, where s/he is going to [...] reconstructing everything that makes a life”. ‘Reconstructing’ implies the methodological principle of “learning through de-learning” (*desaprender*), i.e. liberating oneself from “old” knowledge in order to make space for “new” knowledge, accompanied by “learning through doing” (*aprender haciendo*)²⁹. Philosophically, this evokes Freire’s (1996) social praxis (the action-reflection-action cycle) or Habermas’ idea of emancipatory action, where “knowing and acting are fused in a single act” (Habermas 1972: 212). These action-reflection-action processes can be viewed as an upward spiral, “where each action is progressively more systematic and precise and reflection increasingly turns into a means to give an answer to our expectations and desires” (Leal, 2004b). Systematising the produced knowledge (*sistematización*) can take the form of writing (article, theatre play, billboard) or video-work and the like.

The theoretico-philosophical framework is put into practice through “learning projects”, which aim to foster investigative capacities from a situated perspective. This means that transdisciplinary groups of students – i.e. groups formed according to students’ geographical origin rather than their respective programmes of study³⁰ – support their neighbourhood in resolving real community problems.³¹ Typically, projects are developed in marginalised communities, as it is there where most UBV students come from.³² In that way, the university is at the service of the people rather than creating “just another” elite alienated from society (Fernández Pereira, 2005). Additionally, the processes of analysis involve conscientisation, which strengthens critical, non-positivistic problem-solving. As a practice of participatory democracy, the popular sectors determine the research agenda and therefore gain partial control over the curriculum, thus challenging the “hegemony of the professional organisations” (Greenwood & Levin 2000). With respect to participatory democracy, the projects further support the creation of community councils (*consejos comunales*), a form of participatory planning and budgeting at the community and municipality scales. Moreover, it is worth noting that this element of Bolivarian pedagogy challenges positivistic notions of educational quality, as expressed in quantifiable standards, since the quality of education also manifests itself in “the possibility of improving the living conditions of the Venezuelan people” (Fernández Pereira, 2005: 9).

Ultimately, the Bolivarian pedagogies aim to support the sub-altern's alienation from their own power of generating transformatory knowledge by their own initiative, to subsequently emancipate themselves from intellectual and economic dependence on privileged elites (Rahman 1985). In this sense, knowledge as a product of the work *in situ*, where the individual becomes a bearer of knowledge and a social subject (Mavárez L., 2005), means a democratisation of knowledge. The imperialist disqualification of knowledges alternative to the dominant western scientific knowledge equates with, in Boaventura de Sousa Santos terms, "epistemicides" (Santos cited in Dale & Robertson 2004). However, alternative knowledges, or an "epistemology of the South", are a precondition for alternative sociabilities and societies. A "monoculture of knowledge", rather than an "ecology of knowledge" where scientific and lay knowledge can co-exist, silences alternatives to the status quo (Santos 2001).

Internationalising HE from a non-commercial perspective

Whilst the internationalisation of HE is not a recent phenomenon, the traditionally cultural or cooperative motives underlying the processes have, from the mid-1990s on, increasingly been supplanted by a commercial approach. The new paradigm primarily manifests itself in the emergence of lucrative distance learning programmes and the establishment of HE branches by Northern institutions abroad. This commodification of HE has been driven by a range of bi-/multi-lateral free trade agreements, most notably the World Trade Organisation's GATS. Substantial criticism has been raised, as these agreements would undermine State sovereignty over determined aspects of education policy, change the meaning of education as a public good, and favour the private education market. They may further alter the work relationships in education centres (IE, 2003) and lower the quality of education. And, of utmost concern, they jeopardise the implementation of human rights policies and are likely to have a detrimental impact on social cohesion.

Other criticisms have highlighted the accentuation of educational North-South inequalities, stating phenomena such as brain-drain, the purchase of Southern education institutions by Northern corporations, and curricular homogenisation.

However, while certain developing countries have – for different reasons – been reluctant to liberalise their education services, the Bolivarian government is one of the few that have overtly opposed the inclusion of education in commercial agreements.³³ A key argument to reject the commercialisation of education “the way potatoes or coffee are commercialised”, as a senior MES official put it, lies in the detrimental effect that a global education market, hegemonised by the education industry in the core countries, has on the fostering of the “cognitive sovereignty” of the country and its population. Furthermore, it should be considered that the South’s comparative advantage in the export of education services is minimal, if not inexistent. The Venezuelan case is paradigmatic for this disequilibrium: even though our data are restricted to education service *consumption abroad* (as only one form of trade in services³⁴), they demonstrate that Venezuela hardly exports any education services, whereas annually 9.957 Venezuelans study abroad, over half of which (5.333) in the U.S.³⁵

As much as the Venezuelan government objects to a market-driven internationalisation of education, it promotes an internationalisation based on the logic of cooperativism, culture and exchange. Since such relations include the entire Latin American/Caribbean region, the Venezuelan approach forms an integral part of broader a counter-hegemonic proposal for regional integration – the ‘Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas’ (*Alternativa Bolivariana de las Américas*, ALBA). As an alternative to “free trade” and the accompanying inequalities – thus replacing liberal “comparative advantage” with a “co-operative advantage” – ALBA aspires to set up a multi-polar global system embedded in international relations more adequate for the needs and potentials of developing countries.³⁶

The Bolivarian government’s HE flagship project of regional integration is the ‘University of the South’. More than a new institution, this network of Latin American public universities embodies the Andrés Bello agreement – a treaty of International Public Rights ratified by eleven ibero-american countries³⁷ – which, among other things, aims to “strengthen public education policies serving the shared problems and interests of the States”, as well as to “deepen the cooperative interrelations” in HE³⁸. Concretely, this means developing an international academic community and an exchange of knowledges, including the exchange of university

teachers, students and researchers, the mutual recognition of titles, and the creation of joint programmes of study. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the ALBA pervades other education levels, as reflected in the Cuban-Venezuelan active commitment to eradicate illiteracy in the Latin American/Caribbean region.³⁹

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Conclusion

The government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela conceives HE as an undeniable, universal social right. Against the government's ideological backdrop, HE acquires a pivotal role in deepening all dimensions of the revolutionary process. This centrality expresses itself in a range of initiatives, which have a bearing on all areas of education policy: firstly, as regards financing, public investment in HE has been dramatically expanded. Secondly, with respect to provision, an increased presence of the public sector is evident, where the opening up of new education spaces introduces significant innovations compared to the traditional HE model. With respect to regulation, new contents, methodologies and pedagogies have been introduced, guided by the principles of Popular Education and advancing an autonomous development model nevertheless tied into a counter-hegemonic regional integration strategy. Finally, the hegemonic commercial internationalisation of education is openly rejected, whilst calling for an internationalisation along cultural and cooperative lines.

For these reasons, the Venezuelan HE policies contrast the global HE agenda and thus challenge the principal neo-liberal axioms in education. While most countries worldwide are implementing education reforms geared towards "efficiency" and "competition" (understood as subordination to the prerogatives of capitalism), in Venezuela these tendencies are being reversed. This tells us that the fatalism which often accompanies (and legitimises) neo-liberal education policies can be stood up to under certain conditions. Some of these, as can be concluded from the Venezuelan case, are a strong political will and a clear conception of education as a public good and a universal right.

It is still early to evaluate with precision the impacts, potentialities or the limitations of the Venezuelan educational transformation. Undeniably, the challenges to be tackled are still many. Let us bear in mind that to some extent massifying HE can indeed effect upon the quality, or that access of the hitherto excluded may involve 'inclusion with segregation' – that is, the popular sectors participating in HE circuits different to those of the middle and upper classes. Moreover, the rapid implementation of the reforms has provoked imbalances and aggravated political tensions. Nevertheless, some of these contradictions – heavily exploited by parts of the opposition – are not that different to those encountered in the "massified" levels of primary and secondary education in most countries marked by unequal social structures, not only in the South.⁴⁰

Issues like these suggest that certain problems that manifest themselves in HE – in Venezuela and elsewhere – emerge in response to not only internal factors (such as inadequate resources), but also to external factors. Such problems could be mitigated or resolved through, on one hand, improving the quality of education at the lower levels⁴¹ and, above all, advancement towards a more egalitarian society. The latter rests on the idea that in order for education policy to be effective with regard to improving equity and quality, it is indispensable to take the impact of poverty and other social determinants into account (Bonal et al, 2005). Therefore, education planning would have to transcend the sector concept and become sensitised to the potentially positive and/or negative impacts of non-educational public policies on the education sector. In this respect, the Bolivarian Republic's holistic approach to integral, endogenous development, where HE policy is firmly embedded in other

revolutionised social, economic and political policies – such as land and income redistribution, free health and state-subsidised food, micro-credit and work creation programmes – constitutes an example well worth to study further.

Notes

[1](#) Latin America's folk hero Simón Bolívar's (1783-1830) liberation struggle against Spanish rule was driven by his vision of a united Latin America strong enough to fight outside imperialism.

[2](#) In addition to the educational missions, there are health and food missions as well as those that promote the social economy and cooperativism, (indigenous) rights, etc.

[3](#) Misión Sucre derives its name from General Antonio José de Sucre (1795-1830), praised for inflicting upon the Spanish empire the decisive defeat in the Battle of Ayacucho.

[4](#) The bulk of the fieldwork upon which this chapter is based was conducted between June-October 2005. Quotes from sources other than English are the authors' translations.

[5](#) See, for example: Golinger (2005); North (2005); Waller (2005); Shannon (2005).

[6](#) Poverty statistics vary according to source and method; also see Feres (2001) and UNDP (2000).

[7](#) See CRV (1961), Articles 55 and 78.

[8](#) See MDGs, Section III, Paragraph 19, normatively depriving the poor of HE.

[9](#) See Couto (1998) for the difference between individual and collective empowerment.

[10](#) An example for this is the HE subject "Venezuela in the global context".

[11](#) See: or on this issue.

[12](#) For example, in the OECD countries in 1999 the private sector had an average share of 14% in primary and secondary education, compared to 26% at the HE level (OECD/UNESCO World Education Indicators).

[13](#) Within the Bank's strategic framework, the IFC offers financial services to lucrative and non-lucrative private education institutions in developing countries. *Edinvest* is a Bank-created electronic Forum which aims to "increase private participation in educational development" and provides information for potential

investors in the education sector of developing countries

(www.worldbank.org/edinvest).

14 See, e.g. Tooley (1999a, b); West (1995); Patrinos (1999); World Bank (1999b); BM (1996); Albrecht and Ziderman (1992).

15 Out of the 800 universities in the region, 500 are private and 300 public .

16 Source: www.sisov.mpd.gov.ve

17 *Universidad Marítima del Caribe; Universidad Nacional Experimental Politécnica de la Fuerza Armada; Universidad Nacional Experimental del Sur del Lago; and UBV. IUTs in the federal states of Bolívar, Apure, Barinas and Nueva Esparta; and the IUT de la Fría.*

18 In 2001, average private HE spending in the OECD countries was 21.8%, compared to 36.3% in (selected) developing countries (Argentina, Chile, India, Indonesia, Israel, Jamaica, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay).

19 The importance ascribed to HE is further reflected in the creation of the MES in 2002.

20 Data is from 2003. Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

21 *Bachiller* is someone who holds the *bachillerato*, the Latin American/Spanish equivalent to A-Levels.

22 Source: *Aló Presidente* No. 235. In *Aló Presidente* No. 238 Chávez stated that with 336.499 students enrolled, Misión Sucre makes up 24.6% of Venezuela's university population.

23 Monagas, a fifth nucleus (i.e. main seat) was inaugurated in October 2005. Ultimately, there will be eight nuclei, each of which covering 2-5 federal states.

24 At the time of writing, abolishment of these examinations is being discussed.

25 By September 2005, 1.719 *aldeas* had been created. Another 40 were under construction (Diario Vea, 21/09/2005, p. 4).

26 Plan Atcon is named after U.S. State Department functionary Rudolph Atcon, whose 1961 landmark report "The Latin American University: a key for an integrated approach to the coordinated social, economic, and educational development of Latin America" advocated a redesigning of Latin American universities with the objective to demobilise the critical university.

27 'Competencies' are being established as a key mediator between the productive and educational spheres. Competencies-based education reinforces the adaptability of

the pupil/student to the incessant change in the world of production, a crucial quality for the survival of individuals and organisations in an increasingly inter-connected and competitive capitalist system (Magalhães & Stoer, 2003).

[28](#) The other UBV programmes are: Agroecology; Architecture; Computing for Social Management; Environmental Management; Juridical Studies; Political Studies; Public Health Management; and Social Communication.

[29](#) *Aprender haciendo* originates in Simón Rodríguez' (1769-1852) radical educational philosophy. Besides his philosophical thinking, Rodríguez is also remembered as the teacher who most influenced Simón Bolívar.

[30](#) In addition to the idea of transdisciplinarity, this strategy further lends the projects an endogenous development dimension, rather than that of 'external intervention'.

[31](#) Depending on the context, this may be water supply, sewage, recycling, public transport or communal media projects. The UBV students are immersed in the same project throughout their entire period of study, and work with the community one day per week.

[32](#) This dimension of *municipalización* is being 'nationalised' now in the sense that the new Law of Community Service of Students of Higher Education (RBV 2005), in effect since 14th September 2005, obliges *all* undergraduate students (including those in private universities) to complement theoretical knowledge with experiences in the realities of the communities in the form of a 120 (academic) hours, non-remunerated community placement over three months.

[33](#) As have Argentina and Brazil. As signatories of the 2004 Brasilia Declaration, the two countries have committed themselves to not liberalising and to "actively prevent" the negotiation of education within the GATS .

[34](#) The others are: cross-border trade, commercial presence and movement of natural persons. See: GATS.

[35](#) Data from UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

[36](#) See: www.alternativabolivariana.org

[37](#) These are: Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Spain, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Paraguay.

[38](#) See: www.cab.int.co

[39](#) See: www.alternativabolivariana.org

[40](#) A good example is the Spanish 'LOGSE' education law, implemented from 1993 on. This law expanded the compulsory education age from 14 to 16 years of age,

implicitly targeting school-leavers from the most under-privileged sectors. Despite the fact that the reform was under-funded, it allowed a partial democratisation of education. However, large parts of the education community and the conservative political class concluded that LOGSE pre-eminently diminished quality standards. [41](#) In this regard, we – as does the Bolivarian government – agree with Reimers (2002) in that educational opportunities are an accumulative process which starts with pre-school education.

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