

Executive summary

In Colombia, the beginning of a new century has brought with it a palpable feeling of optimism. Colombians and visitors sense that the country's considerable potential can be realised, and prosperity can become the norm. Good government and effective institutions will lead the way forward, moving the country past the old and seemingly intractable obstacles and conflicts that muted progress for too long. The feeling is that a new sense of security, new potential to expand trade, better infrastructure and institutions, along with other investments, can bring new opportunities, and Colombians are ready to respond energetically.

Education is rightly seen as crucial to this process. As opportunity expands, Colombians will need new and better skills to apply to new challenges and prospects. The past underperformance of Colombia's education system is both a cause and an effect of a system unable to provide high quality education to all. An "education revolution" has begun and progress is being made. Basic and secondary enrolment, quality and learning outcomes are trending upward. Most positively, the system is being infused with a sense that success for all is possible. The government rightly wants success and opportunity at the tertiary level to be a part of this revolution.

The government's main policy goals at the tertiary level focus on the key challenges: expanding enrolment and improving equity, increasing quality and relevance, and making governance and finance more responsive. To achieve these goals, policy makers and stakeholders must find ways to reach consensus, work together and overcome inertia. Like any tertiary system, over time Colombia has drifted away from focusing exclusively on the needs of students, the graduates they become, and the society in which they live and work. Restoring the focus on how tertiary education can serve these needs is a good organising principle for reform.

The joint OECD-World Bank review team found many strengths in Colombian tertiary education. Much deserves to be recognised, preserved, and expanded: *(i)* a commendable expansion of enrolment in the past ten years; *(ii)* a diverse institutional landscape; *(iii)* sound and consistent

national planning and policy formulation; (iv) strong support for equity and a world class student loan institution; (v) comprehensive and advanced assessment systems and a dedication to data-informed decision making. These core strengths will become more effective and more valuable as the reform agenda progresses.

The main elements of reform are the right ones, but consensus on the precise content of changes has been elusive. Consensus exists on the need for expansion and the commitment to increasing public resources is welcome. The government developed a proposed reform of Law 30 – the main statute governing tertiary education – and vigorous national debate accompanied its dissemination. Opposition to for-profit education dominated the headlines, but, in the review team’s view, other aspects of the proposed reform were and are more important. First among these is the need to review the complexity of the current scope and hierarchy of degree types (technical, technological, bachelor’s, specialisation, master’s and doctorate) and the legal restrictions on the type of institutions that can offer them. Simplification of the number of different degree types would create the conditions for better relevance and higher quality. Decisions on whether to grant or deny institutions permission to offer degrees of a particular type, now based on legal classification, would be better based on programme quality and overall institutional capacity.

The review team believes reform can succeed if a number of related elements are woven together. The simplification of the range and hierarchy of degrees connects to the greater facilitation of pathways between degree levels. Currently, graduates of technical and technological institutions seldom get any academic credit for prior coursework when they pursue more advanced degrees. The creation of propaedeutic cycles has helped some, but more effort is needed. Given the importance of non-university degrees, it is also crucial to make progress on integrating the National Training Service (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*, or SENA in its Spanish-language acronym) more fully into the tertiary system. As the system improves coherence, it must continue to improve quality and relevance. This requires continuous review of the demand for graduates and the extent to which institutions are providing graduates with relevant skills.

The dramatic increase in tertiary enrolment witnessed during the last decade has also resulted in a more equitable distribution of access to tertiary education. The goal of enrolling 50% of the age cohort is appropriate and achievable, but it implies new challenges for access and student finance policies. Colombia has a world-class student loan institution in the Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad (ICETEX, *Instituto Colombiano de Crédito Educativo y Estudios Técnicos*

en el Exterior). Every day, more and more aspiring students are able to realise their educational dreams because of the opportunities ICETEX provides. However, the resources available fall short of aggregate need, meaning that some qualified-but-needy students are left out. The expansion of public provision has helped create additional opportunities for financially needy students. The long-term aim of student financial aid policies should be to reach the greatest number of students while respecting and promoting the diversity of institutions and options available to students. A first step toward improving the student finance system will be increasing resources for student loans. At the same time, institutional finance policies seem to result in unevenness of opportunities for access; in some regions, tertiary education will be essentially free of charge in some public institutions whereas in other regions students must pay significant fees. Government policy ought to seek to lessen these disparities.

Quality and internal efficiency problems in secondary education reverberate in tertiary, and too often close pathways for learning and professional success for students from poorer families. Many students, especially those from the lower socio-economic strata, lack the preparation to succeed at the tertiary level. First, Colombians graduate from secondary at the young age of 16, with fewer years of education than most of their international counterparts. Secondly, the secondary system itself has serious deficiencies. High dropout rates from tertiary education attest to the gap between students' aspirations and the abilities they have been able to acquire in secondary education. Dropout is costly, for students and for society. The government has made it a priority to understand why it is so common and to mitigate it, but more needs to be done. Several steps can be taken to improve the readiness-to-succeed in tertiary education for secondary school leavers. These include raising learning outcomes at the secondary level, introducing a 12th grade of schooling or an optional bridge year between secondary and tertiary studies, and providing better information to aspiring students about which programmes are right for them.

As more students enter the system, efforts need to continue to assure the quality and relevance of their degree programmes. Colombia has a number of strengths to build on when it comes to quality, relevance and quality assurance, including the fact that the labour market is continuing to absorb and reward tertiary education graduates. The marked increase in the supply of new graduates, especially those with technical and technological degrees, has not significantly reduced the financial return to these degrees. While these trends need to be closely monitored, employment figures for graduates confirm that their skills are valued by employers. However, it is still too common to find programmes with questionable or weak quality and little relevance. The Regional Centres of Higher Education (CERES, *Centros*

Regionales de Educación Superior), for example, could provide an important dimension of access but need to redouble efforts to ensure the rigour and relevance of the education they offer.

No royal road to quality exists; quality emerges from continuous investment in faculty qualifications, in research, and from the day-to-day efforts of academic staff to strive for excellence. The government's mechanisms for promoting quality are contributing, yet need to be further developed to meet the challenges they face. The Register of Qualified Programmes now plays an important role in establishing initial standards for any authorised programme, yet "high quality" accreditation remains the preserve of more elite institutions. Efforts should be made to ensure that quality is reviewed not just at the time of authorisation but continuously. In addition, the accreditation system should evolve to ensure that "high quality" designates institutions that robustly fulfil their educational mandates, whether as internationally competitive research universities or as top-quality technical institutions serving local students' needs.

The governance of Colombia's tertiary education system reflects the autonomy and independence of its institutions. The strength and benefits of a decentralised tertiary education system are recognised in many countries, Colombia included. New and emerging demands on tertiary education systems call for highly effective and responsive governance structures focused on outcomes, transparency and accountability. Colombia should aim to refine governance arrangements continuously to achieve these goals. The Ministry of National Education (MEN, *Ministerio de Educación Nacional*) is encouraged to maintain and expand its focus on achieving national goals for tertiary education attainment and improvement, rather than on ensuring compliance. The national goals for tertiary education can and should be incorporated into institutional decision-making processes at all levels, by developing a common accountability framework. Institutional governing boards and campus leadership need to be focused on the public interest and not on institutional constituencies. The strong national data systems Colombia is developing can be instrumental in helping decision-making become more evidence-based.

The examination system run by the *Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación* (ICFES) – which measures students' abilities when they enter and leave tertiary education – puts Colombia in a position to be a global leader in both the measurement of value-added in tertiary education and, perhaps more importantly, the use of assessment findings for tertiary quality improvement. Therefore, investments in improving and expanding the technical quality of the ICFES system are eminently worthwhile. At the same time, the Ministry of National Education maintains impressive systems for collection of data on tertiary education students and

institutions, especially the Higher Education Institutions Dropout Prevention and Analysis System (SPADIES, *Sistema de Prevención y Análisis de la Deserción en las Instituciones de Educación Superior*). Continued efforts to refine and improve data quality will provide an expanding empirical basis for policy decisions.

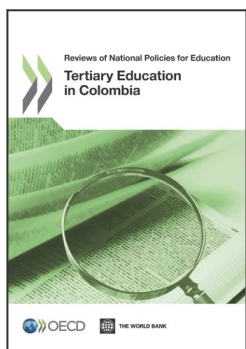
As Colombia's economy matures and grows, it is increasingly seeking a wider range of international partners and linkages; it would be well advised to reflect this growing internationalisation more fully in the tertiary education system. The country has unique strengths that it can share with the Latin American region and the rest of the world; and, like all countries, it can benefit greatly by taking full advantage of the growing international flow of ideas and people. It will be timely to promote a comprehensive approach to internationalisation, including updating of curricula, greater second language acquisition, and mobility of staff and students.

Similarly, Colombia will require greater science, technology and innovation capacity to create the knowledge it needs and to select and adapt knowledge created elsewhere. Marked progress in expanding and strengthening doctoral programmes has been helpful, as has the commitment to invest revenues earned from natural resources to strengthen R&D capacity. Government policies rightly seek to decentralise research capacity and to emphasise the production and exploitation of useful knowledge, whether for local, national or global purposes. Experience suggests that building strong STI (Science, Technology and Innovation) capacity is a multi-decade process, requiring sustained investment and policy attention. Colombia should continue and expand its efforts in this area.

In Colombia the tertiary education system relies on a mix of public and private financing and struggles to reach adequate levels of resources. This is typical of countries with large cohorts of young people where tertiary education has recently changed from an elite to mass system. Colombia has been mobilising resources for tertiary education to finance not only expansion but improved quality and relevance. Public funding has increased, and the government has proposed new financing mechanisms to tie resources to GDP growth rates. All of this is encouraging, but more needs to be done. First, the uneven distribution of subsidies should be revisited. The amounts of public resource available to different institutions, and therefore the affordability to students of the tertiary education they offer, often vary markedly. Students in some localities or seeking some types of careers may find education to be much more expensive than others. Such significant disparities in subsidy are justifiable only if they drive students towards types of study the country regards as a priority. Secondly and importantly, Colombia should increase its efforts to join the global trend toward greater accountability and more links between funding and performance. Under

current laws and financing arrangements, resource allocations to institutions take no account of past performance, efficiency or value for money. No country with so many young people to educate can afford to fund long term a tertiary system without strong accountability and incentives for performance.

Colombians appreciate that, among all the riches of their country, potentially the greatest is their human capital. At the heart of education policy is the desire to see all students receive excellent basic and secondary education and then continue to pursue affordable, relevant and high quality tertiary education in their chosen field. The challenge is to overcome a past history of inadequate secondary preparation, insufficient financial assistance for needy students, unevenly funded institutions and underdeveloped quality mechanisms. Colombia has more than a decade of progress under its belt, and the energy to reach ambitious policy goals. Getting there in practice will involve dialogue and consensus-seeking among all stakeholders, as well as new resources and new rules. Each step forward, however, is a step towards a country that makes the most of its abundant talent.



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