

The World of Education Podcast

Episode 1.8: Venezuelan Higher Education

Guest: Juan Carlos Navarro, International expert in higher education, innovation and digital talent, Senior advisor to several international institutions and universities, Member of the international faculty of IESA (Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración, Caracas, Venezuela).

This week's guest on *The World of Higher Education Podcast* is Juan Carlos Navarro, International expert in higher education, innovation and digital talent; Senior advisor to several international institutions and universities; and Member of the international faculty of the *Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración*, in Caracas, Venezuela. He joins us talk about what has happened to higher education in Venezuela under the rule of Hugo Chavez, Nicolas Maduro, and their Bolivarian Socialist regime over the past 25 years.

The story here is a dystopian mix of Russia in the immediate post-Soviet phase and Hungary under Victor Orbán. At the level of individual faculty members, a mix of hyperinflation and government neglect of higher education funding mean that there has been an extraordinary drop in academic pay: in some cases, over 90%. Institutionally, there has been furious controversy as the government has tried to reduce institutional autonomy and control institutions directly through political means. Universities – and their students – have as a result become one of the government's biggest institutional barriers to one-party absolutism. How the system has managed to stagger forward given these twin challenges is one of the most interesting stories in world higher education today.

A major part of the government's attack on higher education has occurred through the defunding of traditional institutions in favour of a "new", "mass" "popular" institution known as the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (those of you who listened to an earlier interview with Alma Maldonado-Maldonado may remember a similar move being undertaken by the AMLO government in Mexico). Intriguingly, though, the Bolivarian government has allowed a number of private, tuition-dependent institutions to remain open, and these might end up being the seeds of an eventual post-Maduro renaissance in Venezuelan higher education.

But don't take my word for it: Juan Carlos is the expert. You can listen to the full podcast [here](#).

Alex Usher (AU): Juan Carlos, let's go back to the 1980s. Venezuela is by the definitions of the time among the most prosperous countries in Latin America, and certainly one of the most Democratic. Then the price of oil falls sharply, the economy starts to contract, and there's a slide towards instability, two coup attempts in 1992. One by a young colonel by the name of Hugo Chavez. Then a rising climb inflation, crime inflation, polarization. What does the higher education system look like before the arrival of Hugo Chavez?

Juan Carlos Navarro: You are right in describing this framework that preceded the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998. Having said that, the higher education system was well developed, was growing, and was working just fine. Of course they had some problems, mostly in the area of resources because the whole economic downturn of the country and public finances were affected in all the sectors. They had been diminishing resources for health, for social services, for everything, and for education, including higher education. So the public universities were receiving less than they used to but it was marginal, because they were very powerful and influential politically. So they were able to hold on and keep most of the resources. Higher education was not elitist. It was very open. Public universities had free tuition and major private universities had extensive scholarships and student aid programs for facilitating access. Of course, the enrollments were skewed to higher income groups as in every single country in the world. But there was a strong effort to integrate and to

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include the social sectors that could not afford on their own to attend a university. On the other hand, enrollments were expanding. Many institutions were being created, about a hundred institutions. Most of them public, about 75% public including a whole sector of non-university tertiary education institutions like technical colleges and polytechnics that were very popular and most of them were very good. It was a sector that was in good shape and had been expanding over the previous decade. It produced good quality education, generally speaking, and, and it was rather inclusive socially.

AU: But then Hugo Chavez takes over in an election in 1998. His first term is very eventful as he tries to move to the country to the left. It's marked by clashes with of the professional and technocratic class. I'm thinking particularly of the engineer strike at Petroleos de Venezuela. What did Hugo Chavez want to do with universities initially? What was his agenda in that first term? How was that agenda received by faculty and students?

JCN: It's a bit hard to say. That there was an agenda in the first administration at the Hugo Chavez administration. The reason is that there was really a general acceptance I will say or a welcoming of the Chavez victory in most of the university sector. Of course, this was not unanimous, but if you look at the cabinet, for instance, the first minister cabinet of Chavez were mostly recruited in universities. Most of them were university. There was sort of you know acceptance and the feeling that it was this the victory of Chavez was something that was positive for the country. So there was not really any major issues. I don't think that this was a priority for Chavez at the start. It's not like he started administration and announced a big program for universities, there was nothing of the sort. When things started to get important for universities was at the point in which by the end of the first term and the initiation of the second term, Chavez starts... we're talking about 2003 and on... Chavez has already taken some drastic measures. There are some authoritarian leanings in his way of governing the country. And some democratic resistance starts to be felt and universities start being a part of it. Not unanimously as a sector, but certain parts of certain universities start to become very active. And I would say the most striking moment was the constitutional referendum in 2007. Chavez submitted to the country a reform of the Constitution that was very radical. They would declare among other things Venezuela a Socialist Republic, and he was defeated. His first big defeat. Yeah. The leading act of the opposition to the referendum was university students. So I think that changed a lot, that that changed the landscape. He even identified universities as a major point in the opposition. From there, things started to get complicated.

AU: Even before that though, at the beginning of his second term, Chavez announced is something called the Misión Sucre, which as I understand it was sort of a plan for mass adult education. One major part of this plan is the establishment of the Bolivian University of Venezuela, which is a multi-campus university of the people, I guess. It took a lot of resources away from existing post-secondary institutions. I don't know how big this system is now but I've seen numbers from anywhere from a hundred thousand to a million you going to these students. Are these real universities? What are they teaching exactly? what kinds of credentials is it giving?

JCN: Misión Sucre was one of several missions that he undertook as a response to the challenge of the opposition. He wanted to show that he was really delivering good to the population. The major initiative in the Misión was that the Bolivarian University of Venezuela was created from a scratch. It didn't exist before, and it fairly soon it acquired gigantic proportions. We're talking about over

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200,000 students. Explicitly, the idea was that the previous university system had excluded many students, and that they now had to be given access to higher education. So, the university is very comprehensive. If it has name, either a discipline or a career, you can have it there, basically. Engineering, nursing, administration, business, economics, whatever. That was done, as you already mentioned, to a certain extent at the expense of supporting traditional universities. Venezuela had a good public university system. At least five or six of them were very prominent, scientifically large. We're talking about tens of thousands of students the best professors in the country, et cetera. Those were going to be suffering out of the resources that will be channeled to this new institution. At the same time it was done so quickly that academic criteria played little role in it. So, it has always been a shadow over the quality of the graduates. Now, there are easily hundreds of thousands of graduates of this university and a parallel university that was called the University of the Armed Forces. That is also over 200,000 students and, in this case, it was the product Chavez of transforming a previous technical Institute of the Armed Forces into a full-fledged university. You have of all those, and you have hundreds of thousands, probably half a million graduates by now. I'm sure some of them are very competent and have a good education for some reason but that's a bit random. So there is no quality assurance, there's no information, there's no way to establish the doubts over whether those are really well earned diplomas or not.

AU: Juan Carlos, turning back to the older public universities, Venezuela spent a good deal of the last decade in one of the worst economic slumps anywhere in the world. What have been the financial impacts of this on universities and on the academic profession?

JCN: If you add the effect that we were discussing before of you know, moving resources from traditional universities to these new universities, and then you take into account the economic decline, the hyperinflation above all, what you have is terrible impact. I have a hard time finding words to describe how hard this impact is. We are talking about senior professors earning \$1 in salaries and things like that. You're talking about retired professors starving, literally, because their pensions are not enough to feed them things like that. And of course, massive brain drain. The talent has basically immigrated. By last count more than half of accredited society scientific researchers in Venezuela now live abroad, just to give you an idea. So there has been a massive loss of academic capacity. ~~ou hear stories I don't have~~, It's very hard, by the way, to get systematic information because no public agency publishes statistics or factual information about this. But you hear stories about whole departments closing down or whole degrees disappearing and things like that because in public universities there's just no experience, no professors, and no resources at all.

AU: It sounds to me a lot like what the universities were like in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s during that collapse. Professors not being paid for months and as you said maybe making a salary of \$10 or \$20 a month. What else do they do to make ends meet?

JCN: Well, I think collapse, by the way, is a good word for the system. I think that whomever can leave has left, and most of the people that remain are because they have many connections internationally and can manage to get some international support or grants or things like that. Some of them stop being full-time professors and dedicate some time to private consulting and things like that. But most of the traditional idea of the academic dedicated to the full-time instruction and research is basically almost disappeared.

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AU: Apart from the financial challenges that universities face, what kind of policy changes have there been in public universities? What have Chavez and Maduro tried to do with universities in terms of controlling things there or shifting priorities? What's been the focus of policy change in public universities?

JCN: Connecting to what I was saying before, I think that the universities remain to be perceived by the government as in the opposition, as political actors, hostile political actors. What we have seen is a series of repeated attempts by the government to take over the governance of institutions in Venezuela. There are elections every five years or four years for the university President, Directors, and the main authorities. Those that vote are the students and the professors mostly. So it's an internal election, and the government cannot appoint directly the director. There's exceptions but most of the cases are like that. There has been a political struggle to make sure that whoever is selected next will be sympathetic to the government. But, those attempts, for the most part, have failed. So the internal resistance of universities to the government has been very strong. Most universities remain in the column of opposition for the government. I would say there is no policy other than controlling, but attempts to control them have so far mostly failed. That's the status.

AU: I know that the students have been in the forefront of political protests in Venezuela the past few years. Certainly in 2017, a number of them were killed in demonstrations as a result of political violence. Is it an organized student movement or is it something, so is there a national student movement that that puts up this resistance? Or is it more a local and ad hoc opposition?

JCN: I say that the students have their organizations, student centers, and student federations, but for the most part, they have coalesced, they have become really organic and coordinated on some specific instances like consider referendum or the protests of 2017. You may know that right now, the situation in Venezuela, politically speaking is hard to define in sense that there is this feeling that the government has consolidated. There is still some opposition out there, but they're not particularly influential right now. So I think the students are in that context. So you cannot see as of today a clear activism that has a clear direction. Now I am sure that if the situation evolves in a more well-defined contest for power again, as it has done periodically over time, the students would immediately get the act together and be a part of it.

AU: So far, we have been talking about public universities, but what about private ones? Have they been able to maintain independence? Have they been able to maintain quality by charging tuition fees?

JCN: Yes. There has been tension politically speaking between private universities and the government. It hasn't been an easy relationship, but the private universities have been able to count on the support of the umbrella provided by sometimes the church, in the case of the Catholic universities, sometimes the business sector or what remains in Venezuela in the case of other universities. So they have been functioning in some sort of bubble of autonomy that has protected them with some difficulties. And of course, the economic situation has affected them too. But I would say that they are the best functioning universities in Venezuela right now. You can recognize them as normal institutions doing interesting things. They have all also made an effort to continue being inclusive of low-income students. They have developed programs for community development with the surrounding populations. So they're trying their best to adjust to the situation in the country

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and to gain legitimacy and maintain quality. And I'll say they have been, with difficulties, they have been achieving it.

AU: Looking forward, eventually the Maduro government's going to fall somehow, right? All governments end at a certain point. How will Venezuela begin to rebuild its higher education system when that happens? What are the building blocks for future improvement? And should the country go back to the status quo anti, or are there new models it could or should adopt?

JCN: Well, Alex, that's a very important question. I think that the level of destruction is such that there is the agenda of rebuilding business as usual is not realistic. On the contrary, this is my opinion, and I'm sure there will be people with different takes on it. But my impression is that you have to take the level of disarray and the sort of a blank slate that has been created with higher education in Venezuela as an opportunity. So, I think that the system should be rebuilt. It is vital for the future of the country, but it should rebuild probably along different lines.

AU: Juan Carlos Navarro, thank you very much for joining us on the show.

JCN: Well Alex, thank you so much for this opportunity and I hope has been minimally interesting,

AU: Absolutely. It remains for me to thank the show's excellent producers, Tiffany MacLennan and Sam Pufek, and of course, you, the listener for tuning in. If you have any comments or suggestions for future episodes, please send us a line at podcast@higheredstrategy.com. Join us next week when we will be talking about the new University Autonomy in Europe Scorecard with one of the report's authors, Enora Bennetot Purvot. Bye for now.