

Building community engagement into Higher Education in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

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Introduction

Working extensively in Venezuela, I have been impressed by the ways in which universities there cope with massification, which has transformed the university system, while demonstrating a strong commitment to student engagement and redressing disadvantage. Academics there work with substantial student cohorts in a system underpinned by socialist principles to benefit not just the individual students but also the communities in which they live and work.

Since the late Hugo Chávez's first presidency, following a landslide election victory in 1999, this growth is demonstrated by frequent references to its now being ranked second in Latin America (behind Cuba) and fifth worldwide in university enrolment rates, as reported by UNESCO in September 2010 (Ramírez 2010, cited in Griffiths, 2013). This expansion has resulted in a nearly 200% increase from 1999 to 2009, from under 900,000 to over 2 million students (Ramírez 2010, cited in Griffiths, 2013).

The transformative process, founded on socialist principles, seeks to build students' social and political consciousness in order to undertake work in the interests of the local community, the society and the Bolivarian Republic

“A particular feature of the envisaged transformation is the intent to directly link higher education to the project of national endogenous development, under the banner of reconnecting universities to local communities, and to concrete social problems and their resolution, thus connecting theory with social practice”. (Griffiths, 2013, p. 92).

Redressing disadvantage

The Bolivarian University (UBV) was founded in 2003 as part of a major attempt to extend access to higher education, and is free to all students. It “seeks to fundamentally challenge the elitism of many of the traditional universities” (Griffiths and Williams, 2009) Social justice and equality are “at the core of all educational content and delivery,” and all courses



taken at UBV use PAR methodology, a multidisciplinary approach linking practice and theory, which bases students in their local communities, working alongside mentors on a community project, which are a core part of their formal studies (ibid.). Examples of this described by Griffiths and Williams include Community Health students working with doctors within the *Barrio Adentro* health mission, Legal studies students establishing a community legal centre to advise and support families with civil law issues, and education students working with a teacher/mentor in schools in their local community.

All UBV students relate theory learned within the university to their working on project. As Griffiths and Williams explain:

“The approach is designed to place day-to-day decision-making and problem solving in the hands of local communities, as part of the broader societal reconstruction underway, with all participants gaining skills through the process. The intent is that the PAR methodology places researchers in positions of political leadership, but with the projects being democratically controlled and driven by the communities themselves and their own leaders, and aimed at realising the objectives of the community based organisations” (ibid., pp. 43–44).

They conclude that while the discussions are interesting, what is most important is *who* is taking part in them. This is not only, they argue, social and economic inclusion but also *political* inclusion, with educational decision-making in the hands of staff, students, parents/carers and the community at large.

In higher education as in other sectors in Venezuela there are serious shortcomings that need addressing, particularly in terms of the prevalent transmissive modes of teaching, and organizational issues highly centralised governance structures and practices which can lead to the appointment (rather than election) of university authorities. Problems experienced in Venezuela include casualisation of the academic workforce and extremely high attrition rates accompanying the expanded enrolments in some universities, caused partly by inadequate funding and resources to support these expanded numbers. While these shortcomings mirror the situation in many countries worldwide, university teachers the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela are striving to overcome them.

References

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