

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Latin American Universities

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Classroom in Campinas, Brazil / [Wikimedia Commons](#) / Priscilla Micaroni / [Creative Commons License](#)

Even prior to the sudden dislocations that began in March 2020 with the spread of COVID-19, Latin American universities faced a challenging environment. While average gross enrollment had doubled since the turn of the century, from roughly one fifth to two fifths of the college age population across the region, budget constraints stemming from protracted economic stagnation were squeezing institutions struggling to meet that growing demand. Annual GDP growth had languished at 0.4 percent between 2014 and 2019, according to the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), straining public sector budgets and forcing painful cuts at state universities. Private providers of higher education, in turn, grappled with stagnant incomes that eroded the purchasing power of tuition-paying households.

The pandemic has made this difficult situation considerably worse, potentially catastrophically so. ECLAC now projects a decline in GDP of more than five percent in 2020 and forecasts that 29 million people will fall into poverty, with 16 million more descending into extreme poverty. “To find a contraction of comparable magnitude,” the Commission stated, “one must go back to the Great Depression of 1930 (-5%) or even further back to 1914 (-4.9%).”

To gauge how the pandemic might be impacting higher education in the region, during May of 2020 the Center for Latin American & Latino Studies at American University conducted a survey completed by officials at more than 50 universities. More than half of these institutions were in Brazil, where public universities, a key element of the national education landscape, already faced severe budget cuts promised by the hostile administration of Jair Bolsonaro, the so-called Trump of the Tropics. Ours was not a scientific sample, though we received responses from 14 countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Responses were submitted

from both public and private institutions. We found evidence not only of substantial adverse impacts of the crisis over the past two months, but also deep trepidation about prospects moving forward.

Among the highlights our survey revealed, the following are noteworthy:

- Campuses everywhere closed their facilities to students during the second half of March and have yet to re-open two months later. Nearly three quarters of them transitioned to some degree of online instruction. The exceptions were all public universities, particularly in Brazil, in part for reasons noted below.
- The move online was not without glitches. Half of survey respondents considered that they were well-prepared or somewhat prepared to make the transition, but half deemed their institutions to have been either not well prepared or unprepared. Moreover, in a finding that highlights the presence of yawning digital divides, no fewer than 90 percent of respondents indicated that they anticipate some students having difficulty accessing the internet, and over 91 percent linked this with socio-economic and territorial disparities (see figure 1). Nonetheless, fewer than half of the institutions represented had taken steps to address the needs of students lacking adequate internet connectivity, and in some instances, particularly in public institutions, this gap was a motivating factor in the decision not to move instruction online.

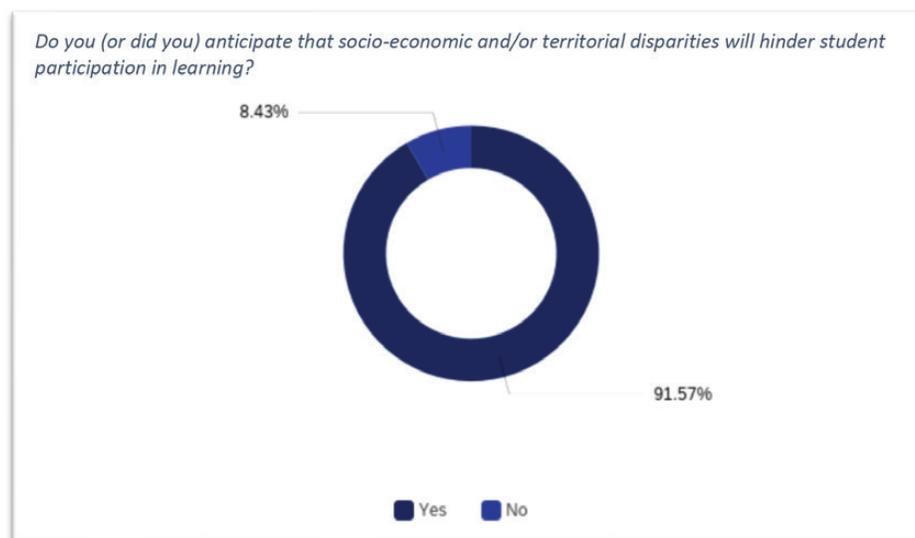


Figure 1

- Zoom was the most popular platform for instruction, cited by 43 percent of respondents. Other common platforms for online teaching, and for coordination by the four fifths of universities in our sample that instituted teleworking for faculty and staff include Google Meet, WhatsApp, and internal systems at individual institutions.

- Expectations are widespread that it will be some time until on-site classes can resume. Only a third of respondents at private institutions and a fifth of respondents from public institutions (mostly in Brazil) anticipate offering courses through August 2020, a period that in many countries normally constitutes part of the standard academic calendar. As for the remainder of 2020, respondents were divided evenly between affirming that they would re-open or being uncertain whether that would be possible. See figure 2 below.

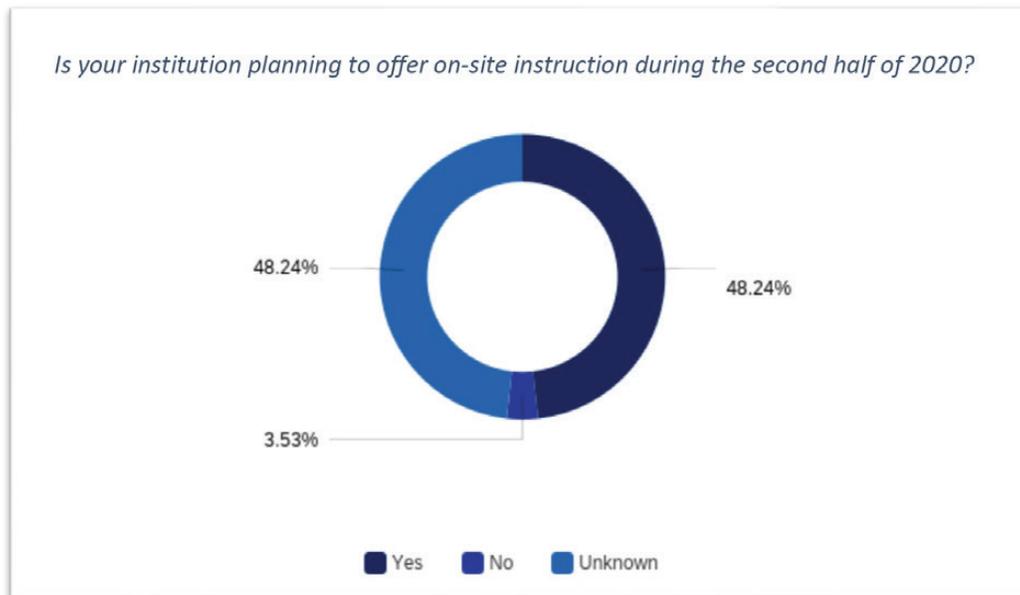


Figure 2

- Not surprisingly, this does not bode well for enrollments during the coming academic year. Fully 84 percent of respondents predicted a drop in undergraduate matriculations, with half of them estimating a 10 to 25 percent decline. These predictions were only slightly better at the graduate level, with 81 percent of respondents anticipating a decline, and more than two fifths of them also estimating a drop between 10 and 25 percent. Interestingly, none of the respondents at private universities – which are highly tuition dependent – expected to maintain current enrollment levels. While most respondents at public institutions are anticipating declines, 16 percent and 19 percent of respondents predict stable enrollment levels for undergraduates and graduate students, respectively. Three fifths of respondents from Brazilian public universities expect enrollment declines at both levels.
- Roughly two thirds of the institutions surveyed host some international students, and of those 60 percent of respondents from public universities and 30 percent of those in private institutions predicted enrollment to decline by more than 50 percent.
- Declining enrollments portend severe reductions in revenue. Half of respondents indicated that their budgets had been impacted during the current fiscal year, and only a tenth anticipated stable financing for the coming fiscal year, with most expecting cuts of 10 to 30 percent. Hiring freezes are widespread, and while one third of respondents from private institutions did not expect salary cuts, only a quarter of those in public institutions were as confident.

- Not all of the universities we polled are involved in research, but many of them are. Just over half of respondents at these institutions envisioned either freezes or cuts in budgets, though 10 percent – all at public institutions – expected continuity. Most of the universities that include research within their mandate have launched initiatives to gauge the impact of the pandemic, and this was particularly evident among private research institutions.

While uncertainty is perhaps the prevailing sentiment, responses to our survey leave little doubt that Latin American universities are facing their greatest crisis in decades. One-quarter of the region’s higher education institutions have been created since the early 2000s, and whether this pace of expansion could continue was already very much in doubt. Now it appears implausible, as they have never had to withstand the scale of shock imposed by the unanticipated pandemic. Indeed, we expect that the responses to our survey underestimate the depth of the dislocation that is in store. Mass unemployment, business failures, and soaring rates of poverty and indigence will reduce the flow of resources to universities through both government allocations and tuition-paying households.

In all likelihood, institutions that are able to re-open their doors will only manage to do so after making substantial, unanticipated investments to ensure the safety of students and staff – reconfiguring buildings, classrooms, and offices, as well as developing testing and isolation protocols that will be extraordinarily difficult to implement.

Furthermore, students will need additional support as the pandemic affects their families, campuses, and communities. Such support exists at many institutions; 72 percent of respondents to our survey regionwide, and 96 percent in Brazil, indicated that their institutions provide psychological support services for students. There was virtually unanimous agreement – 96 percent – that these needs will increase over the coming two years.

That college age Latin Americans will suffer high levels of anguish is inevitable. An estimated 700,000 people in Latin America and the Caribbean have contracted the virus as of May 27, and in most countries these numbers are rising rapidly. More than 35,000 people in the region already have perished. In Brazil alone there were 391,000 confirmed infections and nearly 25,000 deaths. In an increasingly bleak landscape, there is reason for concern that Latin America’s university sector may prove to be yet another victim of COVID-19.

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