

Institutional Politics and Reform in Mexican Higher Education
The Experience of the *Universidad Autónoma de Puebla*

Wil Pansters
Department of Cultural Anthropology
Utrecht University
P.O. Box 80.140
3508 TC Utrecht
The Netherlands
w.pansters@fss.uu.nl

Not to be quoted without permission from the author

Prepared for delivery at the 2001 meeting of the
Latin American Studies Association
Washington DC, September 6-8, 2001

Introduction: Mexican Higher Education

Since the beginning of the 1980s, Latin America has been the scene of profound transformations. In almost the entire continent, a wave of neoliberal policies affected the functioning of the economy, the political system and institutions in civil society. A great deal of attention has been devoted to the policies of economic restructuring, focussing on the impact on industry, commerce and finance. Important changes can also be observed in the public sector. In Mexico, the restructuring of state-society relations in the broadest sense of the term took off after the economic crisis that hit the country in 1982. This tendency deepened and accelerated during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). In these years government institutions and organizations highly dependent on government resources were drawn into a discourse of modernization, where concepts such as decentralization, accountability, competition, quality management, efficiency and openness played a key role. It was part of a comprehensive project to dismantle the statist development model that had been in effect in Mexico for many decades. The new development strategy encompassed economic restructuring by way of the liberalization of trade, the privatization of state-owned companies, ambiguous political reform, the development of new social policies, and the replacement of the predominant ideology of revolutionary nationalism by a discourse of global competition and social liberalism.¹ The technocratic spokesmen of this project argued that the transformations they envisaged would also bring about a democratization of society.

One of the key sectors where the government concentrated its modernization efforts was higher education. Levy (1994: 261) is of the opinion that the unprecedented strength of contemporary efforts to modernize higher education is grounded in the belief that an already

¹ There is an ample bibliography on these subjects. Two interesting collections of essays are Cornelius et al. (eds.) (1994), and Aitken et al. (eds.) (1996).

weak educational system is declining and against the background of changes pursued in the broader political economy. The origin and nature of these efforts can only be understood against the background of the development of the Mexican university system in the past few decades. Throughout the 1970s, higher education was characterized by the sharp increase in the number of students (from 213,000 in 1970 to 731,000 in 1980) and, in its wake, of university staff. The expansion or massification, which caused the transformation of many small, traditional and non-professionalized universities into huge bureaucratically run institutions, occurred without much institutional planning or government intervention. The government and university authorities shared the view that access to higher education should be non-selective. Moreover, state funding was made dependent on the number of students. This increasingly expensive policy was financed by the oil-led economic boom. Another key characteristic of Mexico's higher education system was that the country's public universities operated behind the 'constitutional shield' of university autonomy. For many years, the principle of autonomy had prevented the government from intervening directly in internal university affairs.

The period of 'unregulated expansion', which was the combined result of demographic growth, ample funding, and particular legal prerogatives, was seriously affected by the economic crisis that hit Mexico in 1982. It ushered in a prolonged period of crisis and adjustment, which eventually gave way to a profound reorientation of Mexico's development model. Student numbers continued to increase, but public funding decreased by a quarter from 1981 to 1989 (Kent, 1993: 78). In such restrictive circumstances, the government could do no more than adopt a policy of what Fuentes (1991) has described as 'benign neglect'. The universities themselves were confronted with several problems. Some of them were a direct consequence of the reduction in funds, but others, like the numerous underqualified staff

members who had entered the university during the years of expansion, the factional disputes about scarce resources, the union strikes and the sharply deteriorating public image, had their roots in a much longer institutional history. Public universities were also faced with a proliferation of new privately owned universities that had the passive support of the state (Levy, 1986).

Shifts in the relations among higher education, the government and society at large not only became visible in the 1980s in Mexico, but throughout Latin America. Some years ago, Brunner (1994) described the situation of Latin American higher education in terms of a triple crisis. The system was facing a financial crisis because the model of incremental state funding could no longer be maintained, a crisis of regulation due to the rapid proliferation of private institutions without any significant quality control and regulation, and a crisis caused by the absence of evaluation practices. The combination of this lack of evaluation with the 'paternalistic and benevolent' distribution of resources by the state had led to the emergence of dependent institutions that had no incentives for innovation. In order to combat the multiple crisis, Brunner proposed restructuring the 'social contract' between the state and higher education. This would include replacing traditional funding policies by more differentiated and complex financial relations and adopting evaluation mechanisms. In recent years, steps have been taken in this direction throughout the continent. The launching of new and more offensive policies has been accompanied by a whole new set of ideas and organizational principles with such concepts as accountability, quality assessment, evaluation and excellence playing crucial roles. In Mexico and elsewhere, university authorities acted upon these developments,

launched projects of institutional reform and strived to adopt new administrative practices.² Until now, very little research has been conducted into the impact of these general policy changes on concrete organizational settings. Ibarra recently suggested that 'studies of local institutional realities are necessary to search deeper than managerially and organizationally apparent rhetoric' (1996: 161). In this article, I analyze the organizational transformation experience of the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (UAP), one of Mexico's largest and most renowned state-level universities.³ I hope to provide some insight into the nature and effects of organizational reform and assess its possibilities and limitations. I argue that understanding a process of organizational innovation also requires looking at the political and cultural dimensions of organizational life. I first sketch the major characteristics and developments of the public university in Puebla until the late 1980s. Then the origins, contents and impact of the reorganization project at the UAP, known as the Proyecto FÉnix, are discussed. In the final part of the article, I specifically focus on power relations and on how organizational change is embedded in political and institutional culture.

The University of Puebla

At the beginning of the 1990s, shortly after one of the most serious financial crises of its modern history, the public university in Puebla, a large city a hundred miles east of Mexico City, initiated an impressive modernization project. The UAP had been a left-wing bulwark

² See the contributions on Argentina, Brazil, Chili and Mexico in Neave and Van Vught (1994).

³ Mexico has a 'national university', the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, which is in Mexico City. It is by far the country's largest university. The capital also houses numerous other public and private universities. Each of the remaining 31 federal states has its own public university, usually the most important in the region. Some of these state-level universities have long-standing institutional antecedents, such as the ones in Michoacán and Puebla, and others have been founded only recently, such as the university of the state of

since the early 1970s, when university based political groups violently clashed with an alliance of state, church and private interests.⁴ These conflicts produced strained and sometimes overtly hostile relations between the UAP and crucial actors in Puebla society for many years to come. When the outside 'enemy' began to disappear, the university became more isolated and inward-looking. For a long time, the university in Puebla was a showcase of left-wing hegemony, of linkages with popular groups and movements in the region, of direct democracy, but also of political infighting, hierarchical organizational structures, and clientelistic practices. During the heyday of leftist dominance, Mexican universities went through a process of massification and Puebla was no exception. Increasing the number of students was a policy objective of most university authorities. The 'open door' policy and the active recruitment of students from middle and to an even greater extent lower income groups by setting up preparatory schools was underpinned by the left-wing notion of the '*universidad popular, crítica y democrática*'. As was observed above, this was reinforced by the government's funding strategy that determined the amount of subsidy on the basis of the number of students. Moreover, the political context that pitted the university against outside forces added a further impulse to recruit students, since increased numbers of students and increased resources strengthened the university's bargaining power with state-level and federal authorities. From 1970 to 1981 the number of students at the UAP rose from 8,000 to 25,000. By 1990, the number had increased to 75,000.

In the slipstream of this huge expansion, a hesitant process of academic professionalization could be observed. In the 1970s, the traditional university professors who combined teaching with a medical or legal practice were rapidly replaced by fulltime academics, many of

Quintana Roo.

⁴ For an extensive analysis of the conflicts between the UAP and the different actors in its regional context, see Pansters (1990, chapters 5 and 6).

whome were very young and had no solid scientific background. The diversification of disciplines and the foundation of research institutes also promoted the emergence of the full-time university professor. The growing size and complexity of the institutions led to the foundation of new administrative bodies, but the professionalization of institutional management failed to keep pace. The university witnessed a process of bureaucratization, with the contracting of ever increasing numbers of non-academic, unionized administrative personnel. Most of the organizational developments took place outside the legal framework introduced in 1963 that officially regulated the university. This caused administrative disorder, which worsened when Communist Party interests successfully backed a system whereby executives at all administrative levels were to be elected by a universal vote from academic staff, non-academic personnel and students. Because the elections of rector⁵ and directors took place at different times, the university suffered from a high level of politicization, which led to what De Vries and Moreno (1996: 147) called a 'balcanization of the structures of power'. As a consequence, as a group the academics lost part of their decision-making power. When factional disputes within the Communist Party exploded and spilled over into the university domain, management practices further politicized. The process of 'expansion without institutional reform' was to become an important ingredient in the virtual collapse of the university many years later.

The 1982 economic crisis that brought Mexico to the brink of bankruptcy had a direct impact on the federal funds for higher education and deepened a tendency that was already in evidence. From 1980 to 1989, federal expenditures on public universities fell from 710 to 510

⁵ There is no international agreement about the term with which to describe the highest university authority. In Great Britain one speaks of 'vice-chancellor', in France 'le president' is used, and in the U.S. the term 'dean' is most common. In other countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, the term 'rector' (or 'Rektor') is used. This also occurs in Latin America, where a distinction is made between *rector*, *vice-rector*, who is responsible for a specific area, and *director*, who is head of a department, research institute and the like. In the specialized

million dollars. Overall expenditures on higher education in the same period decreased from almost 4 to less than 2 percent of the GNP (Kent, 1996; Ibarra, 1996: 109). The UAP persisted in contracting more personnel, academics and non-academics, while federal subsidies shrank. This can be partly explained by the 'balcanization' of the power structure, which made competing groups and factions try to enlarge their power base by contracting followers; it is also related to the substantial power amassed by the university union, which exerted a tremendous influence on hiring practices, frequently leading to the predominance of non-academic (i.e. political) criteria. The situation became increasingly difficult when the federal government decided to only finance jobs it had authorized. By then, the university was employing around 1,200 people who had not been authorized by the Ministry of Education. This meant that almost the total subsidy was spent every fortnight on the payroll, leaving no money for operational expenses (de Vries and Moreno, 1996: 161). The financial problems became even more severe in 1987 when a political faction that had been marginalized for many years managed to win the elections for rector. The incoming group immediately clashed with its predecessors, and not only with its visible leaders but more importantly with everyone who had acquired a position of influence under the previous regime in the bureaucracy, the schools and research centers, the University Council and the union. Furthermore, the inexperienced rector provoked a clash with the government. In almost every branch of its daily activities (educational, administrative, political, financial, academic), the model employed to run the university had reached its limits. The image of Puebla's formerly prestigious public university had faded. This was particularly serious because since the beginning of the 1970s, the state of Puebla had witnessed the birth of private institutions of higher education. As this process accelerated in the 1980s, competition with the UAP became increasingly important. Today the

literature on comparative higher education in English the term 'rector' is frequently used.

state of Puebla has the second highest density of institutions of higher education in the country , and is second only to Mexico City.

At the end of 1989, the political stalemate reached a climax and the growing financial problems forced the university authorities to pay the employees only two-thirds of their normal salary. The university split into two camps, and the situation was only resolved after indirect federal intervention forced the rector to leave. In 1990, new elections were held. Their outcome was to mark the beginning of a new phase in the agitated history of the UAP.

The First Reorganizational Offensive

Against the institutional background described above and in the context of the substantial policy reforms issued by the federal government, the newly elected rector, JosÉ Doger Corte, embarked on a project that strived to restructure almost every aspect of university life. In his inaugural speech, the rector announced that regaining institutional stability had the highest priority (Doger, 1990). He emphasized the need to restore the prestige of the university, and to start negotiations with the government, most importantly about the number of authorized jobs, with a clean slate and without prejudice. In order to attain these aims, the new management team declared the need for structural transformations. The introduction of a legal framework to replace the outdated 1963 rules would be the starting point for a reform of the organizational structures and administrative procedures. A restructuring of the financial administration was considered equally important.

The beginning of the first Doger administration -he was reelected in 1993- clearly exhibited elements of a new start, but there were still numerous references to the immediate past and to the UAP's institutional culture forged in the years of left-wing dominance.

References to the 'democratic character' and 'critical function' of the university abounded. The newly elected rector even stated that the 'modernizing policy and the demands for evaluation [by the government, WP] were interfering with the self-government of public universities, conditioning their subsidies in an anti-constitutional way'. He also discerned 'neoliberal views within the university' and called upon the university community to strengthen its compromise with the country's progressive forces (Doger, 1990). These arguments were clearly in keeping with the fact that the group that had assumed formal leadership originated from the left-wing faction that had dominated the institution until 1987. The government had tolerated the resurgence of this group because it was primarily interested in reestablishing political stability (Kent, 1996: 24.)

A new Organic Law was passed in 1991. It contained important amendments to the organizational structure and political responsibilities. Until then, the UAP had been a relatively simple and flat organization, although the rector was always a very powerful figure. The new law added a management layer to the organization in that it created three *vicerectorías*, which were responsible for specific areas such as teaching or research. It was a clear attempt to professionalize the management practices at the university. Another important change in the new law was the elimination of the universal vote, thus drastically reducing the influence of students and non-academic personnel. The law also promoted the decision-making power of academics.

In the first years after the institutional crisis, the new university leaders made it clear that the latter could not be reduced to its mere political and financial dimensions. In their opinion, it was the absence of a model or strategy to define the institution's functions and objectives that had been at the core of the crisis. To the new team, the highest priority was thus planning and, for that matter, gathering of information on spending patterns, staff

composition, student population etc. (Doger, 1991: 4). This put in motion a continuous process of knowing, measuring, recording and monitoring, i.e. a drive to make the organization transparent (Ibarra, 1996: 103). The declared goal was to return the university of Puebla to its academic roots.

The parameters shaping the reorientation were basically handed down by the Ministry of Education. At the beginning of the 1990s, the federal government had created the Higher Education Modernization Fund (FOMES), which allocated extraordinary resources to institutions on the basis of evaluation processes and institutional planning. For the government, furnishing these extraordinary funds on the basis of competition became a privileged way to bring about the (selective) financial recovery of the institutions (Ibarra, 1996: 109-110). In order to acquire these funds, UAP policies were increasingly framed in terms of projects financed by FOMES, such as revision of curricula, courses for teaching staff, the promotion of postgraduate studies, improvement of academic infrastructure and administrative reorganization. Many of these activities acquired a permanent basis and were institutionalized in the form of new administrative units. In 1994, for example, the UAP appointed a general coordinator of FOMES. In this manner, the upper layers of the university bureaucracy came to be occupied by a new generation of leaders, more managers or technocrats than politicians. They would eventually be responsible for carrying out the modernization project. From 1992 to 1995, the UAP received approximately US\$15 million from this fund, an amount that compares favourably with those received by other public universities (Kent, 1996: 27). In 1994 rector Doger stated that FOMES had played a 'fundamental role in the institutional process of qualitative improvement and structural change' (1994: 34). Apparently, the UAP was so successful in obtaining and managing FOMES

resources that it was cited by the Secretary of Education as an example for other institutions (Doger, 1992: 3).

An important institutional policy element in the early 1990s was the effort to cope effectively with the enormous number of students and the large pool of partly unregulated university staff. Since the latter had been a major cause of dissent between the university and the Secretary of Education, from 1991 to 1993 more than 1,300 academics and non-academic workers were laid off. With respect to the students, the authorities decided to introduce the politically sensitive issue of selective admission in 1992. Furthermore, enrollment quotas were set in fields that had a long history of being overcrowded. According to De Vries, the total number of undergraduates decreased by approximately a third from 1990 to 1993 (1996: 60).

As soon as the situation at the UAP seemed to have returned to political and financial stability, the university authorities increasingly explored institutional transformation possibilities for the mid-and longterm future. The first steps were taken towards a general development plan. Strategic planning became a top priority. These efforts on the part of the rector and his team received widespread support within the university community. In this context, and on the request of the state governor, the UAP invited a US-based team of experts from the International Council for Educational Development (ICED) to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the institution.⁶ ICED produced a report that, in the words of vice-rector Vázquez, 'put the institution in order. All the deficiencies and problems of the organization came into the open' (interview, 6 September, 1996). The Council listed the

⁶ State Governor Manuel Bartlett Díaz was Minister of Education at the time of the financial crisis of the UAP. He was responsible for reopening negotiations with the UAP in 1990 and decided to support the university in its struggle to regain stability. Ever since then, Bartlett has maintained warm personal relations (a crucial asset in Mexican politics) with the rector of the UAP, José Doger. While he was the Secretary of Education, Bartlett had contracted ICED to study the entire Mexican system of higher education. When Bartlett became Governor of Puebla in 1993, he had ample knowledge and was well connected in the field of higher education. In the context of this article, I cannot elaborate more extensively on Bartlett's important role in the transformation of

following serious shortcomings of the university: poor quality of education and services; waste of financial and human resources, basically due to high non-completion rates and the lack of opportunities for many students to find employment in their field; rigid and inflexible curricula; a university almost exclusively dependent on government funding, thereby creating a vulnerable situation; a weak and fragmented management system that lacked crucial information; a neglect of its responsibilities towards the local community, the government at its different levels, and other players in the educational system; inequity in treatment of underprivileged students.

Several basic strategies and priority objectives were deduced from these general 'diagnostic conclusions'. The report was a result of the fact that 'since 1990 the UAP was preparing itself to move into a fresh era of educational innovation and modernization' (ICED, 1994: VI), but at the same time it was a stepping stone and instrument for the elaboration of a full-blown and long-term development plan. The working program José Doger ran for his second, now four-year, term with in the summer of 1993 was conceptualized in similar terms (Doger, 1993). After the dramatic events of 1989 and 1990, an integrated set of ideas about how to restructure the university had slowly emerged. By the end of 1993, a whole new discourse about modernizing the institution had taken hold in Puebla's public university and elsewhere. References to the past were no longer made, except in negative terms. Together with another American team, a group of university members drew up the General Development Plan that came to be known as the Proyecto Fénix.⁷

The Organization of Excellence

the UAP.

⁷ The name of the project not only refers to the metaphorical meaning of the Phoenix, but also to the fact that the bird has been on the university coat of arms since 1937.

The title of the working program that got Doger reelected in 1993 was partially incorporated into the slogan of the Proyecto Fénix. It clearly expressed the ideological and programmatic shift the university authorities wanted to implement: the institution was moving away from the '*universidad democrática, crítica y popular*', which was now considered a project that had given privilege to the university's 'political actions and, in its strictest sense, to the struggle for power' (Doger, 1993: 6). This *politically* informed project was replaced by a strategy that centered on *academic* performance and 'excellence'.

The Proyecto Fénix was framed by a discourse that drew a line between the new and the old university. It was thus necessary to update managerial practices, institutional structures and processes, and the attitude and behavior of everyone involved. The academic transformation of the UAP implied a 'critical examination of its academic and institutional traditions, an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses and the revision of values and beliefs within the university' (Proyecto Fénix, 1994: 14). This ambition was explicitly linked to developments in society that put new demands on the system of higher education: technological change, the demand for professionals outside the traditional fields such as medicine and law, and the emergence of new forms of organizing the productive system, especially relevant in view of Mexico's membership in the North American Free Trade Agreement. According to ICED, Mexico's success in a liberalized international economy would depend, in part on whether higher education was willing and able to produce an adequate supply of knowledge and skills (1994: 10). Quality, competitiveness, cooperation (with external actors), mobility and efficiency become core values within higher education.

The general guidelines, principles and objectives of the Proyecto Fénix were operationalized in seven policy lines, each of which was elaborated in detailed proposals and projects.

1. A *curriculum reform* should eliminate the unacceptable discrepancy between the present curricula and contemporary social and economic conditions. There is not enough of a link between the knowledge acquired by university graduates and the demands of the public and private sectors. This requires the continuous evaluation, flexibilization and differentiation of the teaching programs, the elaboration of a credit system and the development of common courses in languages, computing and the like for all students. Planning will be based on labor market prospects. This effort will make an administrative reform in the area of student affairs inevitable.

2. Existing *research programs and postgraduate studies* need to be evaluated according to international standards; new initiatives need to be developed, especially in the areas of scientific and technological innovation; future research programs need to be submitted to feasibility studies.

3. The *improvement of academic standards* for university admission, continuation and graduation.

4. The *improvement of academic staff* by (re)training existing staff and hiring new staff with high academic qualifications.

5. The development of an integrated plan to strengthen and update *the academic infrastructure*, which includes computer facilities, libraries, laboratories and the maintenance and construction of buildings.

6. The *promotion of social co-responsibility*, which refers to the redefinition and intensification of the relationship between the university and (regional) society by founding a

Social Council to consist of community leaders who can suggest long-term university priorities, and a University Foundation to raise additional funding.

7. The *reinforcement of management reform* to reorganize administrative procedures, restructure the financial management and improve the information systems.

In the following years, these policy guidelines were translated into many concrete projects. A credit system was indeed designed and an obligatory set of common courses for all the students was introduced. The open-door admission policy was replaced by entrance exams. The university considerably improved its input-output rate. In the area of postgraduate studies and research, there have been numerous new initiatives. In 1991 the university had seven master's programs and only one Ph.D. program. At the end of 1996, the UAP had thirty master's programs and eleven Ph.D. programs. More than half these programs have been recognized by the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACyT) as excellent. The UAP has stimulated research activities. From 1993 1993 to 1996, the number of researchers increased by 40%. According to official sources, the UAP ranks among the best provincial universities in Mexico (Doger, 1996: 34-42). In terms of academic infrastructure, the authorities made sizeable investments to introduce computer systems at its libraries and administrative system, and to build new class rooms. The pride of the Doger administration is the new smart building that houses the Center for Educational Technology, which costs over 3,5 million dollars and features prominently in the university's public relations in the media.

Restructuring the university's administrative system was one of the key objectives of the Doger team. The first steps were already taken in 1992 when guidelines were formulated for a new administrative model. Since the introduction of the Proyecto Fénix, the emphasis shifted to the *systematization* of various administrative areas, for example student affairs where much work was still done by hand. Subsequently, manuals of administrative rules were

produced to standardize, rationalize and simplify the procedures. The introduction of computers reduced costs. The Administrative Department, with its various divisions, was examined in terms of its organizational structure, financial management and efficiency. Most divisions were reorganized and in many instances, they were granted the status of 'secretary' (*dirección*), each with its own well-paid and influential managing director and secretary. The restructuring of the administrative system led to the appointment of two new positions of two new vice-rectors: one of Budgeting, Planning and Institutional Research and the other for Student Affairs. The improvement and simplification of administrative procedures also stimulated human resource policies: all the levels of the administrative apparatus participated in the training programs. For university managers, a University Administration and Management course was set up.

The financial management reorganization was designed to eliminate waste and deficits and triggered off a comprehensive revision of the financial and administrative rules. New parameters were developed for all the academic units about planning, monitoring and accounting. In recent years, the financial situation at the UAP has indeed changed profoundly. In 1990 all the government subsidies were spent on salaries and benefits, but by 1993 this percentage had dropped to 77%. In 1996, only 52% of the institution's budget was spent on salaries (Doger, 1994: 35; 1996: 69). Raising the registration fees increased the income from this source from one to seven million dollars. The sound financial situation of the university, which was underscored by annual external audits, can be explained in part by the fact that the numerous reorganizations had provided opportunities to lay off many employees. In 1996, José Doger proudly announced that whereas the university had provided work for approximately 8,000 employees in 1991, five years later the work was being done more efficiently and better with 6,500 employees (1996: 69-70).

The reform of the administrative system was accompanied by the investment of 1,5 million dollars, funded by FOMES, in a computer network and program to organize and provide intra-institutional information flows. The authorities took particular pride in this computerized information system, as was evident from the words of rector Doger, who stated that 'despite the crisis, with the application of this system...we have been able to advance on the road of excellence' (Doger, 1996: 61). It is generally believed that the system has functioned poorly.

The above quotation is an indication of the rapid proliferation of the discourse of excellence. After launching the Proyecto Fénix, the university was flooded by initiatives, projects, reorganizations and evaluations in teaching, research, administration, finance, and management. In the course of time, all these initiatives were presented as 'acts or fruits' of excellence. Gradually, the discourse of excellence began to show signs of lapsing into an empty formula. In his 1995 working report, the rector introduced the improvements made in the academic infrastructure (libraries, laboratories etc.) in the following terms:

'A modern center of productivity advancing towards Excellence should be located in an optimal area and have the most advanced equipment and technological instruments that have proven capable of 'Excellence' [...] only in this way, will it be able to enrich the high quality of its raw material and offer the market a product of Excellence...the UAP has been able to pursue the development and growth of its infrastructure, without which, despite having a good academic staff and healthy raw material, it would not be able to advance in Excellence.' (Doger, 1995: 41).

The frequent use (or should one say abuse?) of the word 'excellence' is complemented here by metaphors from the realm of economics. Concepts such as productivity, optimal location, raw material, market, product and infrastructure are indicative of the new university as a company that has to operate in a competitive environment. The managers of this kind of institution have to be modern entrepreneurs. The intensification of the discourse of excellence thus has a clear political dimension: the top executive of an institution of excellence, i.e. the rector, has to be excellent as well. In the context of the longstanding and widespread Mexican political culture of *caudillismo* and its modern version of presidentialism, a successful leader can rightfully demand uncritical acceptance, wield unlimited power, and acquire considerable wealth.⁸

The Politics of Excellence

How far has the UAP come on the road to excellence? How can it be measured or perceived? What does it mean to actors operating in different 'regions' of the organization? Will the changes last? Has the effort to transform organizational practices crystallized in daily routines? How have all these changes affected the power relations within the university and between the university and external actors? What can be said about the ideological and programmatic consistency of the Proyecto Fénix? These questions refer to multifarious aspects of the emergence and introduction of a complex set of organizational dispositions, articulated by the discourse of modernization and excellence. There is the profound redefinition of the relation between the university, the authorities, the Puebla elites, the federal government and the like. The depth and speed with which the modernization project was carried out seriously undermi-

⁸ Elsewhere I have analyzed Mexican political culture at length (Pansters, 1997). The concept of *caudillismo* refers to the culture of the strongman. In the case of the second Doger administration, it is difficult not to see parallels, although on a different scale, with the unprecedented power amassed by former president Salinas in

ned the identity forged by various sectors of the university community in previous years. For some, the ideology of the Proyecto Fénix did away with the 'university community' altogether and replaced it with an ethos of competition and individualism. The current management team has always stressed the need to change the norms, values, behavioral patterns, practices, outlooks, in short, the entire institutional culture that was generated in the 1970s and 1980s. The Proyecto Fénix has even come to include a strategy of promoting a new 'ethical code' among *universitarios*. Has all this worked? There is also the question of whether the expensive investments have trickled down to everyday activities of teaching and research. One professor complained that no matter how 'smart' the Center of Educational Technology might be, the bathrooms in his own building still didn't work.⁹

In the framework of this article, it is not possible to pursue all these issues. I would therefore like to focus now on the political dimensions of the planned organizational transformation. Recent changes in the political relations within the university should be viewed against the background of the dramatic conflict that shook the university at the end of the 1980s and presented an opportunity for the profound reformulation of the Organic Law regulating university affairs.

A major change accompanying the modernization of the UAP has been the emergence and rapid expansion of a new managerial elite. In his analysis of the impact of the change process, educational sociologist De Vries suggests that with the reorganization of the administrative units and the creation of new ones charged with the development and implementation of modernization policies, there was a sharp rise in the number of high level university

the years before he left office in 1994.

⁹ Interview with Nicolás López Vázquez, 12 September, 1996, Puebla.

officials.¹⁰ From 1984 to 1989, the total number of UAP officials increased from 125 to 175, which seems to have kept pace with the 'natural' expansion of the university. Four years later, however, when the numbers of students and staff had decreased substantially, the number of officials had increased to 291. More importantly, the bulk of this increase was accounted for by the staff at the central offices of the university. Whereas the number of officials in schools and faculties only increased from 81 to 95 between 1989 and 1993, the number of high level central administration positions, most of them occupied by academics on a temporary basis, more than doubled in the same period from 94 to 196. These officials were directly appointed by the rector and were therefore beholden to him. They were in charge of the development and supervision of modernizing projects, largely funded by FOMES (De Vries, 1996, 58-59). With this new group, a new management style was introduced at the university. Most managers obtained a car, sometimes with a driver, and a celular phone. Their salaries were doubled and they wore elegant suits. These attributes could be seen as new symbols of power and attested to a general restructuring of the symbolic system that gave meaning to relations within the university and that positioned it in a broader context. One might conclude that these symbols represented the introduction of an entrepreneurial ethos into an institution that had long constructed a self-identity in contradistinction to the beliefs of the private sector.

The consolidation of a managerial elite upset the previously existing power relations between what I call the central and the local power structures of the university. In this context, the transference to the central office of responsibilities that formerly belonged to local units, such as curriculum reform, evaluation of academic performance (hardly existent before), the influx of students and the like was the most important. This shift was partially informed by the fact that federal policies had these issues high on their agenda. The marginalization of local

¹⁰ High-level university officials are the ones who are referred to as '*directivos*' in Spanish.

units was also related to the contents of the new Organic Law that introduced university-wide 'functional councils' that advise the rector and vice-rectors on matters of teaching, research etc. When activities were increasingly organized and managed along functional lines, local level powerholders were surpassed by higher level ones. The centralization of power certainly improved the managerial decision-making abilities, an indispensable asset for any major reform effort such as the Proyecto Fénix. This contrasted strongly with the previous years, when every decision involved numerous actors and intricate political bargaining. For that same reason, a great deal remained unchanged. However, the centralization of power also broadened the gap between the local and central levels of the university, which contributed to a gradual loss of the legitimacy of the modernization project.

The emergence of a new managerial elite and the redefinition of the internal power relations also upset the principal *sources* of power. Throughout the 1980s, the union (SUNTUAP) and the student organizations had a crucial say in university affairs. Powerful union leaders were able to call for a strike and shut down the entire university, sometimes for weeks on end, if considered necessary, so they were forces every rector had to reckon with. At the same time, most of the administrative positions were occupied after elections by universal voting, which gave the students considerable political weight by their sheer number. Students were frequently mobilized in public demonstrations against actors inside (e.g. a rivalling candidate for rector) and outside the university (e.g. a bus company that had raised its fares). If someone wanted to occupy a managerial position at a faculty or college, some link to the student leaders was indispensable. The transformation of the UAP in recent years has effectively marginalized both of these actors. Shortly after rector Doger was reelected at the end of 1993, the SUNTUAP underwent severe divisions and splits that were orchestrated by

the new university leaders. The flexibilization of the work force and the dismissal of numerous staff members would not have been possible without eliminating of the strength of the union.¹¹ The new Organic Law had already drastically diminished the influence of the non-academic workers -traditionally the union power base- in the University Council. The same law also eliminated universal voting, leaving only a minor political role for the student body. The main new sources of power have been technical competence and managerial qualities. Academics turned into politicians or politicians turned into academics once dominated university officialdom, but there has now been a clear shift towards technocratic knowhow and skills, and the language and symbols that go with them. It would go too far to assume that a wholesale technocratic take-over has occurred in the UAP. Managing the university today still requires old-fashioned political skills. Another major shift in the sources of organizational power has entailed the repositioning of the institution within a broader field of regional and national actors. This opened up the institution to outside forces, e.g. the federal government's influence on the developmental agenda of the UAP, and converted having linkages to important non-university actors (entrepreneurs, the government etc.) into an increasingly valued source of power.

The most meaningful effect of the change in terms of power relations has undoubtedly been to reinforce the figure of the rector. The Proyecto Fénix led to a centralization of power intimately related to the person of the rector. Here the force of a deeply rooted Latin American archetype -the *caudillo*-, or of the most Mexican variant -the *cacique*-, amalgamates with the imperatives of modernization, in this case exemplified in the organizational transformation of a university.¹² The Proyecto Fénix is an excellent example of the

¹¹ Based on local newspaper reports from November 1993 to February 1994.

¹² It is also here that the Proyecto Fénix has been criticized most fiercely. A relentless and politically informed

introduction of such modern management practices as efficiency measurement, rational bureaucratic decision-making, planning horizons, continuous evaluation, performance accountability, intra and extra-institutional competitiveness, human resource management, financial transparency and the like, all concepts that seem to have a universal validity and applicability. As I have demonstrated to show, many policy initiatives have indeed changed the organizational landscape and everyday processes at the university. However, at the same time the project has reinforced personal leadership and the concentration of power in the *rectoría*. It could even be argued that the project would not have been possible without it.¹³ Personalism implies a whole set of practices that contradict and subvert the organizational and management objectives of the modernization project. It also implies the discrete use of power and resources that usually run counter to accountability and financial transparency. The concentration of power in one person and his surrounding clique means the risk of having rational and quality-oriented planning and evaluation practices undermined by factionalist interests. Factionalism comes with spoils (and corruption), which go against the logic of efficiency. The absence of real institutional counterweights (the University Council is firmly controlled by the administration) and the unilateral implementation of the ideology of excellence that marginalizes every form of criticism, demand accountability from everybody but do not provide it for the highest management levels.

By the end of his second term rector Doger had become inaccessible to the ordinary university members. Surrounded by armed bodyguards he visited the departments and colleges. Protected by a cordon of bureaucrats, he was isolated from everyday organizational

critique in which accusations of nepotism and corruption abound is Alejandro Gallardo, *El mito de la excelencia* (Puebla, 1997).

¹³ In a way, the whole Proyecto Fénix could be understood as the reestablishment of (personalized) leadership structures within the UAP, which had collapsed in the crisis of 1989-1990.

life. His last annual working reports exude an atmosphere of total complacency. In short, the organizational modernization that upset most areas of the university also promoted the resurgence of the deeply rooted figure of the strongman.¹⁴

Conclusion

Some authors have noted the global tendency of the relationship between government and higher education to move towards a more flexible and accommodating arrangement (Neave and van Vught, 1994). Generally speaking, this shift has restructured the financing of higher education, introduced performance assessment, and reframed the dimensions of autonomy and organizational transformation. Other authors have analyzed the specific situation in Latin America and identified the principal problems in higher education and the major axes along which policy action has been undertaken (Brunner, 1994; Balán, 1993). In the case of Mexico, the debate about the reorganization of higher education intensified after 1988. Here and elsewhere in Latin America, a proliferation of institutional reform initiatives could be observed. But we still know relatively little about the implementation and impact of general policy orientations at existing universities. Most of the studies that addressed these issues did so on a general, sometimes comparative level. In this article I have focused on how these broad processes of change were translated into a concrete project of organizational and operative reform under the banner of excellence. I have analyzed the content and impact of the reform of management structures and practices. Ibarra (1996) noted the radical nature of these

¹⁴ In 1997 elections were held at the UAP. They were won by Enrique Doger Guerrero, former vice-rector and nephew of outgoing rector JosJ Doger Corte. The main opposition candidate declared that the election results were a product of the 'machine politics of the central administration' (see *La Jornada de Oriente*, 24 September, 1997, p. 3). It seems very likely that he will be reelected for a second term at the end of 2001.

changes in Mexico. He observed that the new discourse of excellence became a synonym of exclusion in that its technology and mechanisms of (disciplinary) power and differentiating effects created niches of excellence and masses of mediocrity. However certain this conclusion may be, it fails to place the concrete workings of an organizational change project in the context of broad political cultural patterns and a specific institutional history and culture. By doing so explicitly in the case of Puebla, I have been able to highlight the ambivalent nature of a supposed 'radical departure' and note the equally important strengthening of old-fashioned but effective technologies of power with comparable differentiating effects. Furthermore, an organizational transformation project only acquires meaning by being embedded in a particular institutional history and culture. The implementation of the Proyecto Fénix and its impact on organization members, for example, can only be understood against the background of the institutional crisis that preceded it. Any effort to drastically reform management practices and organizational structures at institutions of higher education in Latin America that fails to take these elements into account, is likely to produce (unintended) consequences that could endanger the entire project.

Bibliography

Aitken, R. e.a. (eds.). (1996), *Dismantling the Mexican state?*, London, Macmillan.

Balán, J. (1993), 'Introduction to special issue on higher education in Latin America', in *Higher Education*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1993, pp. 1-8.

Brunner, J. (1994), 'Estado y educación superior en América Latina', in Neave, G. and F. van Vught (eds.), *Prometeo encadenado. Estado y educación en Europa*, Barcelona, Editorial Gedisa, pp. 11-42.

Cornelius, W. e.a. (eds.). (1994), *Transforming state-society relations in Mexico. The National Solidarity Strategy*, San Diego, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies.

Doger Corte, J. (1990), 'Discurso pronunciado en la toma de posesión como rector de la Universidad Autónoma de Puebla', unpublished.

--- (1991), *Informe de labores, 1990-1991*, Puebla, UAP.

--- (1993), *Programa de trabajo, 1993-1997*, Puebla, UAP.

--- (1994), *Primer informe, 1993-1997. Actos de Excelencia*, Puebla, UAP.

--- (1995), *Segundo informe de labores, gestión 1993-1997*, Puebla, UAP.

--- (1996), *Tercer informe, gestión 1993-1997. Sies años de excelencia para la universidad del futuro*, Puebla, UAP.

Fuentes, O. (1991), 'Las cuestiones críticas de la política de educación superior en la década de los 90', in *Universidad Futura*, Vol. 1, nr. 1, pp. 5-12.

Gallardo, A. (1997), *El mito de la excelencia*, Puebla, edition of the author.

Gradilla, M. (1995), *El juego del poder y del saber. Significación, norma y poder en la Universidad de Guadalajara. Socioanálisis de una institución en conflicto*, Mexico City, El Colegio de México.

Ibarra, E. (1996), 'Excellence at large: power, knowledge and organizational forms in Mexican universities', in Clegg, S. and G. Palmer (eds.), *The politics of management knowledge*, London, SAGE, 99-120.

ICED (1994), *A productive future for the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla*, Puebla, UAP.

Kent, R. (1993), 'Higher education in Mexico: from unregulated expansion to evaluation', in *Higher Education*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1993, pp. 73-83,

--- (1996), 'Institutional reform in Mexican higher education: conflict and renewal in three public universities. Prepared for the Social Programs Division of the Interamerican Development Bank', Mexico City, manuscript.

Levy, D. (1986), *Higher education and the state in Latin America. Private challenges to public domination*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

--- (1994), 'Mexico: towards state supervision? Changing patterns of governance in Mexican higher education', in Neave, G. and F. van Vught (eds.), *Government and higher education relationships across three continents. The winds of change*, Oxford, Pergamon, pp. 241-263.

Neave, G. e.a. (1994), 'Conclusion', in Neave, G. and F. van Vught (eds.), *Government and higher education relationships across three continents. The winds of change*, Oxford, Pergamon, 264-319.

Pansters, W. (1990), *Politics and power in Puebla. The political history of a Mexican state, 1937-1987*, Amsterdam, CEDLA.

Vries, de, W. (1996), 'Políticas públicas y funcionarios modernos', in *Perfiles educativos*, nr. 71, pp. 54-64.

--- e.a. (1996), 'Historia de una crisis autónoma: la UAP de 1975 a 1990', in Pansters, W. (ed.), *La mirada del Fénix. Universidad y sociedad en Puebla, 1880-1990*, Puebla, UAP, pp. 129-166.