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INTRODUCTION

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The Inter-American Conference on Social Security (CISS) and Universidad Iberoamericana (UIA) co-hosted an international conference on “The Quality of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean” in February 2007. The main objective of the conference was to examine quality of education in the region, the determinants of learning, policy and program evaluation, and the impact of quality of education on the labor market. The quality of education is increasingly being recognized as a major determinant of the well-being of nations, as they attempt to improve productivity and their place in the world economy. Learning outcomes, as much as or more than years of schooling attained, are a significant determinant of earnings ability. The key challenge for researchers is to ascertain the specific policies that improve student learning outcomes. A better understanding of the mechanisms by which learning can be improved will help countries in the region enact effective and efficient policies. This issue contains six papers originally presented at the conference.

Sripad Motiram and Jeffrey B. Nugent draw on a political economy model to hypothesize that the quality of education is likely to be lowered by both economic and political inequalities. In particular, they utilize a panel data set across countries and over time to test the applicability of the hypothesis to quality of education indicators at the primary level. Among the four specific indicators of primary education assigned priority in the World Millennium Development Goals, Gross Enrollment Rates, Net Enrollment Rates, Pupil-Teacher Ratios and Survival Rates from Grades 1 to 5, their focus is on Pupil-Teacher Ratio because of its close association with quality. Because of its considerable variation in political and economic inequality across countries as well as over time and its general reputation for high income inequality and gradual but uneven transition to democracy, their application is to countries of the Latin America and the Caribbean region. While the results do not support the economic inequality hypothesis, they do support the political inequality hypothesis. The latter results appear to be rather robust to alternative choices of estimation methods and empirical specifications.

Sebastian Calonico and Hugo Ñopo argue that the private provision of educational services represents an increasing fraction of the Peruvian schooling system. While there have been many claims about the differences in quality between private and public schools, there is no complete assessment of the different impacts of these two type of providers on the labor markets. This paper is an attempt to provide such a comprehensive overview. They explore private-public differences in the individual returns to education in Urban Peru. Exploiting a rich pair of data sets (ENNIV 1997 and 2000) that include questions on type of education (public vs. private) for each educational level (primary, secondary, technical tertiary and university tertiary) to a representative sample of adults they are able to measure the differences in labor earnings for all possible educational trajectories. The results indicate higher returns to education for those who attended private schools

than those who attended the public system. Nonetheless, these higher returns also show higher dispersion, reflecting wider quality heterogeneity within the private system. The private-public differences in returns are more pronounced at the secondary than at any other educational level. On the other hand, the private-public differences in returns from technical education are almost non-existent. A cohort approach paired with a rolling-windows technique allows them to capture generational evolutions of the private-public differences. The results indicate that these differences have been increasing during the last two decades.

Jesus Alvarez, Vicente Garcia Moreno and Harry Anthony Patrinos use the PISA 2003 student-level achievement database for Mexico to estimate state education production functions. Student characteristics, family background, home inputs, resources and institutions are controlled for. They take advantage of the state-level variation and representative sample to analyze the impact of institutional factors such as state accountability systems and the role of teachers unions on student achievement. Accountability, through increased use of state assessments, will improve learning outcomes. The paper also casts light on the role of teacher unions, namely their strength through appointments to the school and relations with state governments. It is shown that while important, especially good relations between states and unions, accountability systems are more cost-effective measures for improving outcomes.

Maria Emma Santos examines the determinants and distribution of learning outcomes in Argentina using PISA 2000 reading and math scores. She estimates educational production functions at the mean of the distribution using regressions and at different parts of the score's distribution with quantile regressions. In terms of educational policy aimed at improving learning outcomes, results point to the need for educational policies that address gender issues since girls perform significantly better than boys in reading but boys perform significantly better than girls in math. The availability of educational resources at home and good reading habits also contribute significantly to student performance. Also, the results suggest that class size should not be excessive. Schools should be provided with good-quality educational resources, such as stocked libraries, laboratory equipment and multi-media technology. Teachers' commitment and engagement to their work, their relationships with students and their openness to institutional change, are also significant determinants of student performance.

Facundo Crosta also studies Argentina, specifically the broad education reform brought about through the Federal Education Law (LFE). The LFE's main objective was to expand access to basic education, through the reorganization of the school structure and the extension of mandatory schooling from 7 to 10 years. The provinces' reactions were heterogeneous. Crosta tries to evaluate the relationship between the LFE and access and quality. He finds that the LFE provinces tend to have higher access rates and higher retention rates, as well as higher promotion rates for the youngest cohorts. He finds a positive and significant effect of the LFE on access (0.04 and 0.01 for an additional cohort) and quality. Also, he finds a positive sign but of unclear magnitude for the implementation on quality; but when he estimates the effect of intensity, the value of the coefficient is more stable, at 0.02 to 0.03.

Ximena Dueñas studies the issue of choice in higher education in Colombia from the individual's perspective. She is interested in finding out what aspects influence the decision for students and their families when choosing the higher education courses of study. Among other things, she finds that males have a higher probability of attending a public university. Higher wealth individuals are more likely to attend private institutions, but the elites still benefit from

subsidized public higher education as well. Having a scholarship or a loan increases the chances of attending private institutions. This does not mean that public institutions do not grant financial aid, but such aid in public institutions is reflected in lower tuition costs that are not perceived by individuals as financial aid.

Student loans are difficult to obtain, and 90 per cent of recipients are able to demonstrate financial stability (that is, they are employed).