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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to discuss the prospects of Latin American public universities. Its main assertion is that universities could become important actors of development in Latin America, but prevailing trends point in another direction. The paper focuses on the interactions between, on the one hand, specific traditions and social contexts, and, on the other hand, global trends concerning the role of knowledge and academic changes. The specific traits of the evolution of Higher Education in Latin America are discussed, in order to describe the emergence of an original 'idea of University'. Changes and continuities during the last decades of the 20th century are summarized. Similarities and differences between developed countries and Latin America concerning current trends in Higher Education are analyzed. Particular attention is given to the interactions between what is happening in Latin American universities and the new insertion of the continent in the global economy. A prospective analysis is attempted, focusing on the social commitment of universities. (HRK / Abstract

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