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# Privatization of Education in Argentina

## Executive Summary

This document synthesizes the main results of the research: *The privatisation of education in Argentina* by Feldfeber, M., Puiggrós, A., Robertson, S. and Duhalde, M. (2018). The report is a careful documentation of the current privatisation tendencies in Argentina, including its implications and political challenges, in order to contribute and promote an informed public debate.

The governance of education in countries around the world has been faced with considerable changes in the past two decades. It can be argued that the education sector is shifting from being a public good to a private one, one in which the citizen is framed as a consumer of education, a good that is to be marketed and sold. This shift in the way in which education is framed in many of these societies is a consequence of political, ideological and commercial interests which involve institutions, such as the World Bank, along with corporations, such as Pearson's and the Gate's foundation. As a result, states depend upon a number of governmental and non-governmental

stakeholders that influence decision-making in the public sphere (Ball, 2008). This process is becoming more and more prevalent on a global, regional and national scale.

In the case of Argentina, such tendencies have been present in the sector for various decades. However, more recently they are being reinforced by the conservative turn in the government in 2015. The process of privatisation in the country is happening in two different ways: what can be described as privatisation 'in' and privatisation 'of' education. The former refers to the transfer of ideas, practices and methods from the private to the public sector, and the latter meaning a widened participation of private stakeholders in the design, management, and provision of public education (Ball and Yodell, 2007).



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These two processes can be shown to be leading to changes in the role of education in society which are potentially concerning. Indeed, the privatisation of education challenges the significance of education as a public good and as a social right, and moves it to the background. It shifts the focus on its value to that of a marketable good, with the government passing over the responsibility for its design, provision and management to market actors.

For these reasons, it is essential to map out the ways in which the processes of privatisation are taking place in the country, considering the plurality of aspects which are being shaped by the marketisation of education. These processes include the re-distribution of enrolment, government investment in private sector actors, the growing presence of the private sector in decision-making, the privatization tendencies in teacher training and teaching, and the impacts of the profit-making market of standardised testing.

## Re-distribution of enrolment

Following a wider Latin American tendency, the percentage of enrolment in private institutions has grown in Argentina in the past decades, and the country is amongst the ones which show the higher percentages of enrolment in private schools in elementary education. Enrolment in private institutions in 2003 was at 25%, which contrasts with a 29% in 2016. Moreover, it is important to note that this percentage is higher for specific social strata (medium and higher) and geographical location (City of Buenos Aires). Indeed, there are considerable differences between the different provinces, with the City of Buenos Aires facing a

percentage of 51% of enrolments in the private sector compared to 11,9% in La Rioja and 13,4% in Chaco. It is important to consider how the areas in which the enrolment in private institutions is lower tend to be rural, with private provision at its lowest, and citizens relying almost entirely on state education

The spatial unevenness between rural and urban provision parallels what we know about the expansion of markets internationally. Indeed, taking the examples of the US and the UK, we find that academies and charter schools mainly develop in urban spaces, starting with provision for disenfranchised students and later moving on to concentrate in wealthier areas, where the good performance of students in standardized tests is guaranteed. Indeed, given the importance of student performance for the allocation of funds, it is easier for education markets to develop in urban areas where students are more likely to do well. It is not easy to determine the causes of the growth of enrolment in the private sector, given the plurality of factors which might influence it. However, such growth leads the Report to question the effectiveness of some of the education policies aimed at improving public provision, given that their outcomes cannot be measured in the short term. Most importantly, it leads us to grow particularly concerned with the recent policy developments; since the change of government in 2015, there is an evident shift towards stronger privatization tendencies of the sector and lower attention being placed on public schooling.

## Government's investment in private firms

One of the central indicators showing the growth of the private sector is the amount of State funding it receives. At a regional level, Argentina's public expenses in private education is some 12,4 percent, just below the OECD average and second only to Chile in the region. Moreover, the mechanisms and criteria through which subsidies to private institutions are distributed in the country remain relatively unclear. Indeed, there are a number of institutions which, despite charging high fees and serving middle- and upper-classes,

The logo for CTERA, consisting of the letters 'CTERA' in a stylized, blue, outlined font. The 'C' is a circle with a dot inside, and the 'T' has a horizontal bar that extends to the left.

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receive a considerable amount of public funding. In addition, the country is facing an overall reduction in public funds dedicated to the education sector. The cuts being faced go across a variety of education policy programmes, especially those aimed at guaranteeing the standards of teaching and learning

## Growing presence of the private sector in public education

Argentina is facing a strong process of restructuring and redefinition of education policy (Puiggrós, 2017). Indeed, the government has started a strong process outsourcing which cause a rising presence of private actors, with private interests, in the public space. The presence of private stakeholders in public decision-making, from NGOs and commercial backgrounds, are one of the distinctive traits of the current government in Argentina. Therefore, new governance networks and communities (Ball, 2008) have developed in the country, creating a new form of public discourse and power. This new form of governance leads to market mechanisms and interests to shape public policy. Public Private Partnerships (PPP), one of the most widespread governance processes, are pitched as the solution to efficiency and quality problems supposedly faced by the education sector and this has caused a number of different actors to have leading role in shaping education policy (Robertson and Verger, 2012). A number of different private actors, firms, NGOs and foundations, with their own political and economic interests in shaping policy, have been identified in the country. In some cases, these are international foundations, like the Varkey Foundation, that are involved directly in the country. In other cases, they are local firms or foundations that work within a network of international institutions and in both cases, they promote market values, as well as practices based on notions of entrepreneurship, innovation and meritocracy.

## Privatization tendencies in teacher training and teaching

There has been an important shift in the way in which teachers are framed within education. Indeed, it is becoming more and more common to understand the teacher as an individual with their own objectives and interests, rather than placing them within collective relations, especially those of teacher unions. This process is furthered by a number of mechanisms based on principles of New Public Management in education. This developments lead to changes in the ways teachers are perceived within the sector and in classrooms as well as the value that is placed on their role in society, putting the centrality of teaching and learning in the background. Even if the state is responsible for the initial training, there is a growing tendency towards the outsourcing of teacher training, a process which results from the introduction of market values in the sector.

## The impacts and markets of standardised testing

Standardised testing in education has become a major topic of debate globally. In Argentina, as in other countries, standardised testing is framed as the solution to the many problem faced by education systems and poor achievement in such tests considered a major failure of education policy. What is not being said is how such tests are the product of a particular view of education, one which promotes meritocracy and growing individualism, as well as being a more and more



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lucrative sector. Indeed, the government is using the results of such tests as a way of bringing forward changes in education policy, justify cuts to education funding and decrease public investment. Given that privatisation is not only measured through the percentage of enrolment in private institutions or investment in them, but also through the presence of a market discourse in everyday practices, standardised testing is to be considered as a powerful tool in the privatisation process.

Indeed, the logic of meritocracy and accountability processes is growing as a model amongst teachers, students and headmasters due to this policy instrument. In Argentina, a considerable number of private actors, consultants, NGOs and foundations offer technical assistance for the development and implementation of standardised assessment. Therefore, the public agenda is increasingly shaped by private interests, given the growing number of platforms and actors which provide the design of educational material, teacher training and standardised testing.



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