

MARTÍN BENAVIDES

• la reforma
~~im~~posible

Enfrentando
desafíos
del sector
educación
2018-2020



***The (Im)Possible Reform:
Facing the Challenges of
the Educational Sector.
2018-2020.***

**Edited by the author:
Martín Benavides**

**Americas Dialogue on Education
Policy Book & Paper Talks Series**

No. 1



The Americas Dialogue on Education Policy (ADEP) is an initiative created in 2018 by the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) at Columbia University to foster communication between countries of the Americas on Latin American education policy. ADEP regularly organizes regional conferences that bring together scholars, experts, and policymakers to discuss issues related to education across the Americas and suggest tailored solutions to common challenges. ILAS currently partners with the Latinx and Latin American Faculty Working Group at Teachers College, Columbia University, to carry out its activities.

In 2021, ADEP began offering a series of book and paper talks that feature the latest publications in education policy in Latin American and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries. The objective of these talks is to present new research to a diverse audience of professionals and higher education students to receive feedback to improve policy, while also fostering this way of understanding and cooperation throughout the Americas.

Since it is not always possible to keep up to date with new publications, let alone in all languages spoken in the American continent, the ADEP Book and Paper Talks Series was created to offer an academic resource ready for use in higher education, research, and policy analysis.

CONTENT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Martín Benavides is a Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), where he leads the initiative Umbral, a Higher Education Observatory by the Consortium of Universities. He is also Principal Investigator at the Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE), and an Associate Researcher at the Population and Development Center (CEPED) at the University of Paris. From 2006 to 2007, Benavides was Director of Research at GRADE, then he became the Executive Director from 2008 to 2014. In March, 2018, he became Superintendent of Peru's National Superintendency

for Higher Education (Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Universitaria, SUNEDU), where he exercised his duties until February, 2020, when he was appointed Minister of Education of Peru. He left the head of the Ministry in November, 2020. Benavides was Director of the journal *Debates en Sociología* (Department of Social Sciences, PUCP), and was Fellow of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University from 2007 to 2008. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Penn State University.

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BOOK PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

When: November 17, 2021, from 3:30pm to 4:30pm EST

Where: Virtually

La Reforma (Im)posible. Enfrentando desafíos del sector educación 2018-2020 (The (Im)possible Reform. Facing the Challenges of the Educational Sector, 2018-2020) is a collection of memories by former Minister of Education of Peru, Martín Benavides, narrated by himself. The book was made available online in 2021 by the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and the Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE). The Latinx and Latin American Faculty Working Group at Teachers College and the Institute of Latin American Studies, both at Columbia University, hosted a presentation and discussion of the book on November 17, 2021, where Benavides broadly spoke of its content, and which was followed by a Q&A session. The event was hosted by Professor Regina Cortina, from Teachers College. During the first part of the event, Martín Benavides detailed how ***Peruvian public policy has been taken hostage by interests that limit opportunities for reform.*** He stated that the

unstable conditions of Peruvian politics make it even harder to maintain policies over time. In his book, Benavides highlighted how reforms can take place even in such a problematic context as Peru's, thereby proposing a suitable structure to ensure their implementation.

Benavides moved on by describing the first reform in which he took part – the university reform. In a context of low quality universities, illegal education programs, and the absence of internal procedures to ensure meritocracy within higher education, the Peruvian Congress enacted a new law that established an objective and independent regulatory entity to ensure quality in all universities. Benavides described how he was appointed Superintendent of the National Superintendency for Higher Education (SUNEDU) at a time when corporate investors were exerting pressure to influence the institution's decisions for their own benefit. Then, Benavides described how he had to make drastic decisions during that period, such as denying some universities the authorization to operate for not complying with the required quality standards.

Afterwards, Benavides brought up an even harder moment as he was appointed Minister of Education. Some Congress members questioned the university reform and asked for his resignation based on personal interests. At the same time, the first case of COVID-19 was found in Peru, the reason for which Benavides had to decide on closing schools while creating tools to foster remote learning. As Minister of Education, Benavides detailed how the connection with different actors such as social organizations, and public and private institutions, helped to strengthen the remote learning program despite most homes in Peru lacking the necessary infrastructure to access the Internet. After the presentation, Dr. Cortina gave the floor

to attendants for questions. During the discussion, Benavides shared his opinion about the alarming current situation of the Ministry of Education and Peruvian politics. He also gave recommendations for academia to help policy-making: sharing academic evaluation results of public education programs, inviting renowned faculty members to help government officials make more informed decisions, and promoting evidence-based strategies to monitor public programs.

The recording of the book presentation and discussion is available on ILAS's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fy62WAYWmwE>

Institute of Latin American Studies
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

The Latinx and Latin American Faculty Working Group at Teachers College and the Institute of Latin American Studies, Columbia University, invite you to attend

la reforma imposible
THE (IM)POSSIBLE REFORM
Book Presentation and Discussion with Peru's Former Minister of Education Martín Benavides

As part of the Americas Dialogue in Education Policy initiative

"When I was Minister of Education, I told my colleagues that I would remain in silence for at least five months after leaving my position. Out of respect for my successor, since I believed that we were somewhat responsible for what we leave behind. I kept my vow, and these have not been months when I did not want to defend the administration from unfair, imprecise, or false statements. But I remained in silence. Instead, I wrote this book to tell my story as a public servant: first, as a superintendent at SUNEDU and then, as a state Minister. This is not an academic book, but a narrative, documented by interviews of the time, public documents, and facts reconstructed along with some colleagues."
-Martín Benavides

Discussant: Regina Cortina, Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University

NOVEMBER 17, 2021, FROM 4PM TO 5PM EST.

This will be a virtual event. Please register at bit.ly/PeruPossibleReform

To request disability-related accommodations, contact OASID at oadid@tc.edu, or 212-678 3689, (646) 755-3144 video phone, as early as possible.

BOOK SUMMARY

The Origin of the Book

After his term as Minister of Education ended, Martín Benavides wrote this book to tell his story as a public servant. Based on interviews of the time, press documents and the reconstruction of facts with help from his collaborators, Benavides shared his lived experiences as Superintendent of Peru's National Superintendency for Higher Education (SUNEDU) and as Minister of Education.

Structure and Content of the Book

In this book, Martín Benavides described his experience as a public servant of the Peruvian government from February, 2018, to November, 2020.

The book has 11 chapters. In the first seven chapters, Benavides depicted the circumstances that he faced as the head leader of SUNEDU, the institution in charge of verifying that all higher education establishments in the country meet basic quality standards. In this first part of the book, Benavides explained how he faced the manifold political types of pressure that fell upon SUNEDU to favor some universities, as well as the

importance of following a technically supported reform through a smart communicational and political strategy.

From chapters 8 to 11, the author shared the takeaways and challenges that he faced as Minister of Education, the sector's highest authority in Peru. Having a political group against and being witness of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, not only did he explain how decisions were taken under such an unpredictable context, but also the personal difficulties that arose from his duties and the tumultuous political scenario in which he had to perform them up until the President of the Peruvian Republic was evicted from his position and, as a consequence, Benavides had to resign from the Ministry of Education.

1. The first real strike to the university reform

In the first chapter, the author described the challenges that he encountered during the first years of SUNEDU. As a higher education regulatory entity, SUNEDU had already accumulated a series of detractors, amongst whom were the rectors of some national universities, as well as some congressmen. He further highlighted an important milestone in the institution, which was the making

of arrangements to receive its first superintendent replacement after three years of operation. Up until that moment – February, 2018 –, all universities had initiated the licensing process, which involved verifying that they met some basic quality standards to remain open. By the same token, sanctions had been applied to programs offered illegally and to non-authorized establishments. However, the designation of a new superintendent who had been accused of plagiarism and was a close collaborator of the main opponents of the reform put SUNEDU's authority at stake.

As Vice-President of the Board of Directors, and along with three other members, Benavides asked Peru's President and the Minister to nullify the appointment of the new Superintendent. Given the lawsuits that the new Superintendent was facing for plagiarism in her research and the subsequent scandal in the press, the government declared her appointment null and void and was replaced by Martín Benavides.

2. Difficult relations with Congress (2018-2019)

Although Benavides accepted his appointment as Interim Superintendent on March 2, 2018, he was formally appointed Superintendent for three years two months later, putting on hold other personal and professional plans. His objective at SUNEDU was to strengthen the licensing processes and reinforce the institution's legitimacy among the higher education community.

During his time as Superintendent (almost two years), ***Benavides identified one of the greatest difficulties that the institution was facing – political pressure,***

mainly from one sector of Congress, but also from some regional authorities and, at times, from the Executive branch staff, who were looking to intervene in the licensing process in favor of certain universities. Although SUNEDU is a technical apparatus, the political faction was nonetheless its greatest adversary. For that reason, the institution was forced to adopt measures and invest in resources to face the political pressure that fell upon it. Some Congress members were requesting appointments with the new Superintendent to advocate for private universities, which is not compatible with their exercise as public servants and, as such, did not take place. On the other hand, while Benavides was Superintendent, SUNEDU went through two investigation processes by the Congress Commission for Education. No irregularities were found.

3. Time to make the most complex decisions

The first denial of institutional licensing took place in September, 2018. Denying a university's license was not an easy choice, but it was a necessary step within a reform oriented towards the establishment of basic quality standards. For that reason, the denial procedure was preceded by a thorough review of the university's conditions, the stipulation of procedures for its progressive closure, and the transfer of students to other educational establishments to prevent them from being affected by the closure. In addition, the preparations included communication actions such as offering direct attention to students to convey precise information, and provide any alternatives available so that students did not interrupt their careers, as well as press conferences with journalists.

What followed after the first denial was the search for accessible alternatives to ensure the continuation of studies such as scholarships, loans, increases the places available in licensed universities, and a regulatory framework in the same universities under their promoters' responsibility.

4. The big players

Denials continued taking place for other private universities that did not meet the basic quality standards and this, according to Benavides, also made SUNEDU look like a threat to business and political interests.

The procedure began with a multidisciplinary team of technicians who reviewed each university's compliance based on a set of conditions. Then, the technical team presented their report to the Board of Directors. Once the denial decision was made, the communications team and political advisors set the measures to be taken to release the news, and direct attention channels for students opened up.

During the first year, a group of small universities were denied their license, but the big players, as Benavides called larger universities with greater political and economic power, began receiving denials in May, 2019. The author highlighted one of the most extraordinary cases among these big universities, which was owned by the leader of a political party and former Congressman: the architectural maps of the premises did not correspond to the actual situation of the buildings. One of its venues even had a fake front that intended to show that the building had four additional floors

to those that it actually had. Despite irrefutable proof of the university not complying with basic quality standards, legal actions to nullify the denial were initiated in different parts of the country. A media war against SUNEDU began, which included personal attacks against Martín Benavides. Despite those efforts, the public opinion had already aligned in favor of the reform and its pressure counterbalanced the political pressure that the institution was facing.

5. Further strong denials and the case of public universities

Given the clear messages that the institution was making progress, SUNEDU became stronger and its continuity was part of the political agenda of the time. However, an even greater challenge was on its way, which was the plausible rejection of public universities that did not meet the quality standards. *Guaranteeing the independence of SUNEDU, a State apparatus, had to take place by denying, when necessary, the license of the public universities promoted by the State.* In that type of case, the State, as promoter, could not ignore its accountability. For that reason, greater financial resources were allocated to strengthen State universities. In October, 2019, the first public university was rejected for failing to guarantee quality.

6. Let economic resources meet educational needs

While SUNEDU's priority was the institutional licensing of universities, it was also responsible for looking after the adequate use of resources in private universities, given the tax waivers and benefits that these received from the State.

What Benavides observed during his term as Superintendent was that some universities were making considerable profits, but that those earnings were not invested in education. In some cases, those funds were used by political parties or university authorities without limits, reason for which the latter were sanctioned by the regulator.

An estimated 355 million Soles (or USD 100 million, approximately, in early 2022) was the amount found to be redirected, while less than 10% of the reinvested funds were allocated to teacher training, research and scholarships.

7. A very intense 2019 Christmas holiday season

At the end of the year, one of the largest universities of Peru – Alas Peruanas University – was about to have its license denied, so they looked to sign a fusion agreement with another licensed university. Despite the holiday season, SUNEDU was forced to publish the rejection on Christmas day, followed by weeks of continued communication actions with the students from both establishments.

8. Two tough decisions

In February, 2020, Benavides was thinking about resigning as Superintendent when the President offered him the position of Minister of Education. Although he had pending personal projects and was concerned about paying even less attention to his family due to the workload that the appointment schedule required, he accepted. In his first meetings, the flamboyant Minister established a series of priorities: improving learning, which translated in achieving better results in evaluations and narrowing the rural-urban gap; reinforcing schools' infrastructure; defending the

university reform, fully supported by SUNEDU and now, in addition, through a new procedure to license institutes; establishing basic quality conditions at all educational levels, especially for public and private schools; the passing of a new Organization and Functions Law gave way to reforming the Ministry's structure.

9. Eight pandemic months

Only a month after taking over as Minister, Peru detected its first coronavirus case. The 2020 school year had not yet started, when a new remote learning strategy needed to be created. It would be called *Aprendo en Casa* (I learn at Home).

At an unprecedented speed, contracts and alliances were signed with radios, television channels, other ministries in Latin America and global companies like Amazon. A month later, the school year started using the multi-channel strategy *Aprendo en Casa (Internet, television, radio)*. *This has been one of the State's most iconic reactions to rapidly respond to a crisis*, and praised by the international press and organizations like UNESCO.

In addition to the multi-channel strategy, another pillar of the emergency response was ensuring the continued distribution of materials and meals to students during the pandemic. Here as well, the amount of scholarships offered by the State in public universities increased, and a national campaign was launched to promote the continuation of schooling. Finally, the digital gap narrowing strategy was initiated, beginning with the delivery of tablets with educational content to students, especially those who did not have access to *Aprendo en Casa*, neither through radio nor television.

Since this was a brand-new effort and was taking place at a time when educational hardware was in high demand all over the world, the strategy was not exempt from difficulties. First, Benavides described the pressure yielded by the media to speed up delivery times. Further, only one Peruvian company met the requirements for the task, but it was later found not to have a commercial relation with the main office that made the equipment. Therefore, the purchase was canceled, and the delivery process took slightly longer. Approximately two months after the foreseen start date of the distribution, Minister Benavides himself participated in the delivery of tablets to the first students.

10. Advocating for the university reform

During his administration as Minister throughout the pandemic, Benavides admitted that the private sector was a source of pressure. First, parents were requesting the reduction of tuition fees, an understandable demand given that the economic crisis was affecting all sectors. Therefore, the Ministry of Education issued a norm that asked all schools to show their fees in a transparent way as a basis to reach tuition reduction agreements. Second, and to ensure the right to education regardless of students' economic resources, the Ministry opened new seats in public schools in 2020 to take in more than 100,000 students coming from the private sector.

The continued and accelerated quest for solutions was not a factor that decreased tensions that existed in Congress since Benavides' time as Superintendent at SUNEDU. However, he admitted that attacks were rather upfront when he was Minister. Once again, he was cited by the Education Commission, then he had to

appear in Congress for his interpellation. Meanwhile, the country's political instability also played a trick on him. The new President of the Council of Ministers did not obtain the Parliament's vote of confidence, so he had to resign. Under a new premier, Benavides showed up in Congress again to swear in as Minister of Education.

11. A much too quick farewell

Benavides was Minister until November, 2020, when Congress removed the President of Peru from his appointment.

Why Read this Book?

The originality of this book lies in that it is a first person narrative of the challenges and difficulties that a public servant faces. For that reason, it gives way to identifying the different elements to be considered when making a decision in the political sphere.

Since it is such a personal excerpt, the narration allows readers to delve into the perspective of the highest education authority of a country, not only as a public servant, but also as a feeling human being. The author reflects on his lived experiences and provides a more specialized yet critical viewpoint of the procedures that take place within a public entity.

This book can be accessed free of charge at the following links:

- [“La reforma \[i\]m\]posible. Enfrentando desafíos del sector educación 2018-2020” del Dr. Martin Benavides | Departamento Académico de Ciencias Sociales PUCP](#)
- [La reforma \(im\)posible: Enfrentando desafíos del sector educación 2018-2020 | GRADE](#)



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