

# EDITORIAL

## OPEN LETTER

To the members of *Sistema Universitario Estatal* – SUE (State University System) and to the members of *Asociación Colombiana de Universidades* – ASCUN Colombian Association of Universities

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As an ex member of the Consejo Nacional de Educación Superior – CESU (National Council of Higher Education), during the 2010 – 2015 term, in representation of Colombian university professors, I consider it a moral obligation and an imperative of political action to make my reflections public on the current situation of higher education in Colombia, especially at the specific moment of inflection generated by the *Ministerio de Educación Nacional* – MEN (National Ministry of Education) and its sectoral policies, distant at their core from what some have intended to qualify as *public policies*.

It is important to start reflecting on this particular issue, as

... not everything done by the State and the government is a public policy. A public policy is not necessarily synonyms with government action; it refers to a specific way to approach and solve social problems which assumes the achievement and consolidation of consensus to be part of the decision making process (Cuervo, 2007, p. 68).

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The French Pierre Muller (2002), quoted by Cuervo (2007), provides a complement to this by clarifying that if a public policy is to be defined as a government action plan, nothing is said about the social genesis of public policies, their main feature, what grants them their condition of *public*. In addition to this reflective analysis, we ought to add the following:

Democracy has its own method to define public policies. Decisions derive from a negotiated adaptation of interests, which agree with transparent rules defined in public space. Policies do not reflect the alleged omniscience of enlightened technocrats; on the contrary, they represent the refinement of legitimate interests, a meeting of the minds, among which is the Government's. (Cardoso, 2003, p.3.)

It is not necessary to go into further detail, or to bring additional foundations to theory, to prove that everything the main State agency (MEN) is doing with higher education opposes diametrically to what in essence, and according to scientific rigor, should be assumed as public policy. Many, maybe too many, arguments and texts were written by me to call CESU's attention on what I considered an incorrect and antidemocratic path, the one taken to lay down the general guidelines of higher education in its immediate future, and in a timeframe extended to twenty years; but unfortunately there was always the same balance: my outcries fell in deaf ears, and what is even worse, MEN "legitimated" decisions they had already made (a clear example of which is the Inspection and Surveillance Law that was not even discussed) without the active participation of CESU members, let alone of the Country's university community.

In the same line and from the revision of statements released by two very important instances in this critical argument, I conclude that two important texts have been written recently, among others. The first one is known as "DECLARACIÓN PÚBLICA DEL SISTEMA UNIVERSITARIO ESTATAL" (Public statement by the State university system), it was signed in Pereira on October 6, 2014 (I confess I have not found any documents after this date containing the thoughts of the principals who comprise this "system", which is not to say that no other demonstrations have been made after the referred statement). The second text came to public light on Friday 4 of September, 2015. It was entitled "DECLARACIÓN DEL CONSEJO NACIONAL DE RECTORES REUNIDO EN SESIÓN EXTRAORDINARIA" (Statement of the

National Council of Principals gathered for an extraordinary meeting), and was signed by Father Jorge Humberto Peláez Piedrahita S. J., principal of Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Juan Diego Castrillón Orrego, principal of University of Cauca, and Carlos Hernando Forero R., who work as President, Vice-president and Executive Director of ASCUN respectively.

In the first text, and in reference to the issue of the need of resources to finance higher education, the SUE Principals reclaimed a raise from the Congress and the national Government that should not be less than 4% above inflation for the 2015 period. Since this request failed, facing 2016 and without any response in sight, State universities are again on the brink of collapse. The curious thing is that principals warned in the same text that in the previous year (2013, at that moment) *a similar request was also unattended*, which has implied *freezing up universities' income budgets in permanent pesos for two years*. They finish the statement by saying that ... *The present situation has serious implications on the stability of universities, and harms the supply of higher education and the future of society*. Notice that the aforementioned freezing is heading for its third year in operation. From any perspective, the national Government's indifference is absolutely unacceptable, as it has turned its back on the critical financial situation of universities and, paradoxically, it claims to be aiming at becoming *Colombia, the most educated by 2025*.

Several crucial issues are outlined in the ASCUN document such as worries shared by the principals and the academic community in general regarding already on-going reforms which are being introduced

... in a fragmented way, lacking any comprehensive revision of the statutory framework required by the set up and development of a new education system, the funding, promotion, inspection and surveillance of higher education, as well as of the other systems and tools created by the National Development Plan 2014-2018.

This fragment refers to nothing less than the lack of processes and procedures typical of public policy design, implementation and assessment.

By the same token, ASCUN members share a considerable worry about the support given by MEN in the PND (National Development Plan, after its name in Spanish) to the so-called Sistema Nacional de Educación Terciaria – SNET (National System on Tertiary Education), a device introduced by the Government without the analysis and participation of the academic communities, thus harming seriously the stability of the higher education sector itself, as it structurally damages issues such as institution typology, program nomenclature, training levels and creation of new bodies of government. University principals urge, in a statement derived from the extraordinary national council, to

...do a wide call on all the actors and the interested, to get involved in a participatory way, as prescribed by the Constitution. This call is critical to undergo a comprehensive revision and to design the educational system required by the Country, its components, its articulations, its statutory framework, as well as the sector's governance aimed at strengthening the Ministerio de Educación Nacional.

Again, it becomes evident in this excerpt of the statement that the latest initiatives, guidelines and rules passed by MEN, blatantly disregard the required democratic principles for upholding laws and regulations, which shall govern the destiny of a crucial sector for the social and human development of the Country.

ASCUN takes an especially critical position in regard to measurement models such as the Indicator Model of Education Performance – MIDE (after its name in Spanish), created by MEN, because “... they blur the role of higher education, thus inducing a homogenizing approach which does not acknowledge our Country's reality”. They also reject the Ministry's adoption of discriminatory mechanisms, which lead to universities being simply notified of accomplished facts, decisions and results being hastily communicated through the media and, as was MIDE's case, with conceptual and methodological deficiencies; all of which fails to acknowledge the complexity of university mission functions, and harms the social image of higher education.

Very academically reliable sources, endowed with the scientific rigor provided by broad spectrum research activity, claim that, once thoroughly revised, MIDE cannot even be qualified as a model, as it lacks the basic structural elements to resist the slightest idea of adjustment. MEN's particular style resembles more and more each time the various control devices imposed by totalitarian regimes, proper of despotic or tyrannical systems, which seemed to have been banned in many latitudes. A strategy which has proved to be fruitful for MEN, to silent voices and avoid critical judgement of academic communities over their different initiatives, has been to promote the already infamous "socialization" of all rules and regulations created by this State agency. "Socializing" will never be the same as legitimating, and a central element of public policy is undoubtedly the need to establish its political viability or legitimation among the communities which could either benefit from or be harmed by such policies.

All the principals belonging to ASCUN expressed that:

They share with the Government an interest to focus efforts on improving the quality, and ask for serious consideration of, and consequent action aimed at the strengthening of the institutional capability, and the requirements of a financial sustainability scheme, both for higher education, and for investment in science, technology and innovation, which should be backed by the necessary resources, established in the Nation's General Budget.

The Association of Universities is right to require financial sustainability, not only for higher education, but for Colciencias as well (systematically battered administrative department, with budget shortages known to all). Unfortunately the Colombian State –its rulers–disobeys international recommendations such as the one in the final statement of the World Summit Of Higher Education, held in Paris in 2009, according to which: "Higher education, as a public good and an imperative strategy for all levels of academic training, and as a fundamental element to research, innovation and creativity, should be an issue of responsibility and economic support for all governments".

In turn, Father Jorge Humberto Peláez SJ, in the opening statement of the aforementioned ASCUN's extraordinary council, claims that,

in several occasions, we have been summoned to certain meetings called "socializations", in which information is offered on issues related to the Government's educational agenda, and comments are received. We think "socializations" cannot be taken as a debate one shows to support or to legitimate the proposed measures, or any consensus surrounding them. We believe the desire to produce immediate results has led to partial reforms, to *patches*, which generate noise and confusion.

This behavior is typical of the Ministry of Education, of which I was a victim during my stay in CESU, for four years. We always went to the meetings of this institution to expect new surprises of their officers, particularly both the Minister and the Vice Minister of higher education. Neither SNET, nor the Inspection and Surveillance Law, let alone MIDE, just to mention three crucial elements within the scope of the sector, were submitted to discussion or analysis, let alone approval on the side of CESU members. To sum up, this instance, created through article 34 of Law 30 of 1992, requires an urgent structural re-definition in terms of its functions of coordination, planning, recommendation and advisory, as there is enough evidence to admit that none of them is fully served. If the main function is to support what MEN says, each member of the organization should analyze if that is the role it wants to play within CESU. Particularly, the prescriptions of article 35 of this hastened law are disobeyed, as CESU does not really propose anything to the national Government in terms of plans or policies; the most it ever does is comment on some aspects of quality guidelines, penalties to higher learning institutions, and some occasional issues of little relevance.

The guidelines and general (structural) lines of the Government's policy are simply informed to the institution, and it is generally assumed that they are thus legitimated. In its foundation, the institutional architecture of higher education is very exclusive and antidemocratic in Colombia; a situation that is even worsened by authoritarian styles such as the present ones. The headline with which El Espectador newspaper referred, on September 10 of 2015, to the current situation faced by universities is not gratuitous: *Principals isolated by the Ministry of Education? Directors of 84 universities believe that minister Gina Parodi is reforming the current*

*educational system "in a rush". "Overlooking" (not keeping somebody in consideration, disregarding them) is a practice that has become habitual in higher education. I ask ASCUN and SUE whether the structuring issues of the sector have been considered; for instance, an in-depth solution to financial problems (how long have they been trying to obtain base oriented budget increases?), or the need to discuss higher education institution typology (which considerations uttered by either of the organizations associated to principals or their institutions have been taken into account?)*

Some principals claim, off the record, they actually feel intimidated by the reach of Inspection and Surveillance Law (1740 of December 23, 2014), and do not dare to firmly question MEN's decisions, as it would not be hard to get surprise visits of MEN's technicians to inspect their administrative actions. Each person is the master of their own fears and, in the face of a regulation that is overtly regarded as unconstitutional by some (responses are expected to the lawsuits filed against it) as it harms the main core of autonomy, it is fathomable that all kinds of preventive measures be taken.

- 1) How long are the university communities going to have to wait before the legal representatives of universities enforce the autonomous character of higher learning centers? I remember the principal of University of Chile some years ago, telling us in an international summit that he was the first to lead demonstrations, and the first in line to grab a placard and reclaim decent treatment from the government for their institution. Today in Europe, especially University of Seville, embarked on a crusade for decent budget to carry out their one century long mission.
- 2) How can principals remain indifferent before absurdities denaturing the institutions themselves, with clearly authoritarian measures taken by MEN in regard to matters fundamentally related to university actors? Where are university governability and governance in the exercise of their autonomy?
- 3) Why don't principals join students and professors in a common cause, together with administrative employees and the management of each institution, so that university autonomy may be recovered, as well as guarantees of financial viability and livelihood? It is

incredible that such principals are still not aware of the strength attached to unity, if they can rely on university communities to struggle for the great purposes of higher education.

- 4) Shall we finally succumb before the authoritarian and tyrannical style that haunts the Ministry, which laid off many its best officers in order to pursue goals that differ from the mission of universities as academic and cultural heritage of our nation?
- 5) Shall we finally be forced to generate our own resources to survive, and turn academia more and more into a business which tends to forget the very purpose for which it was created, associated with generating, diffusing and applying knowledge to the improvement of living conditions?

Commercialization of higher education in order to obtain resources via service offer, a not very creative way developed by academic capitalism of partially alleviating financial hardships in universities, is not a structural solution to the deficit accumulated after law 30/92. Decent funding is demandable of the Government in order to consolidate institutional efforts which, even with insufficient funding, have committed to the increase of quality standards in training processes in order to better face social challenges. It is not through denaturalizing *Universitas* that the advance in the path of permanent improvement will be achieved. The measurements of rankings will not allow superlative improvements in the quality of education. Even more important than comparing ourselves with others –who might even be light years ahead- is analyzing ourselves autocratically so that we can assess to which degree each institution accomplishes its mission function.

Dear principals (SUE and ASCUN members), university students to whom most of you owe yourselves, require your committed political action to recover the core of the university autonomy granted to you by the primary constituent. May history not say that the few remains of the already sullied university autonomy have been slaughtered by this generation. Count on students and professors, if the idea is to dignify the Alma mater's noble



mission. Time has come to build critical mass and make up for lost time, and transform the current state of affairs. Serious and intelligent mobilizations are expecting us.

Manizales, September 14, 2015

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