

PROJECT COLUMBUS: EVALUATION AND PROSPECTS

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"Living hell is not something that will be; there is one, the one that already exists here and now, the hell we live in every day, that we form together. There are two means of avoiding the suffering it inflicts. The first is easy for many: to accept the inferno and become so much a part of it as no longer to see it. The second is dangerous and calls for constant attention and careful learning: to seek and know how to recognize who and what, in the midst of this hell, is not hell and to make it last and give it space".

Italo Calvino, *The Invisible Cities*

Just over three years ago, at the *first encounter between rectors from Europe and Latin America* held in Buenos Aires in April 1987, a new type of dialogue began among academic leaders on both continents. The aim was not to duplicate efforts made in a wide range of fields -be it exchanges of teachers, promoting student mobility or joint research- but to give university leaders an opportunity to discuss problems inherent in running places of study with their colleagues. Such a dialogue was to pave the way for concrete action designed to improve university performance in areas viewed as critical and the training of managerial staff to help the rectors bring about such improvements.

Institutional development, construed as a *conscious process of creation* that makes it pos-

sible to choose and plan action-oriented goals and to oversee the most appropriate mechanisms for their attainment, thus became a central concern of *Project Columbus* even before it acquired its name. The cornerstone of cooperation was an exchange of experiences among colleagues in order to compare, analyze and endeavour to resolve common problems, albeit with different dimensions and implications. The goal was to nurture existing possibilities through comparison with different situations. This concept of development was a potential innovation with respect to the most widespread international practises although it can be traced back to such classical sources as, for example, Wilhelm Meister's time of learning.

The programme's success was based on two main premises. First, a firm belief in the innovating potential of multilateral cooperation. Indeed, during these three years, the creative tension between the approaches developed by Europeans and Latin Americans to similar problems has clearly been stimulated thanks precisely to the great range of experiences encountered in each of the two regions. In setting aside cultural supply or demand "monopolies", multilateral dialogue makes the framework of cooperation more flexible and opens up many more avenues. No less importantly, multilateral dialogue also served as a catalyst in joint work among institutions on the same continent and sometimes in the same region or city.

The second pre-condition of effective dialogue was a commitment by the institutions involved to cooperate in an open-door policy for a minimum period of five years. (What ambitious plan in recent years has not counted on the magical attributes of 1992?) To be honest, it is necessary to say that there was no certainty of being able to continue. In Europe, the comprehensive representation and prestige of the CRE (440 member universities) ensured active participation by European universities. In Latin America, 41 universities in 13 countries became involved in varying degrees in activities under Project Columbus. 21 of them are fully-fledged programme members and the candidature of 12 other universities is being considered. Many of them are leading universities in the region. The development of new forms of communication, particularly the growing popularity of facsimile, contributed decisively to the consolidation of a Europe-Latin America network of cooperation.

II

November 1989 marked the beginning of the second stage of *Project Columbus*.¹ Its main aims are to foster the development of strategies suited to the circumstances of member univer-

sities in the fields of academic planning and evaluation and cooperation with the productive sector, and to train university management responsible for implementing such strategies.

The second stage began with the *first study tour of Latin American rectors* to European universities. 19 rectors and vice-rectors from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela spent two weeks visiting six European universities in the Federal Republic, the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom. During their visit, the Latin American participants had an opportunity to make a detailed study of specific solutions in the above-mentioned fields and to assess the effectiveness of the approaches developed by European universities in terms of conditions and possibilities in Latin America. As a result of this tour, many participants decided to draw up concrete plans to strengthen strategic planning and evaluation in their universities and to encourage the transfer of knowledge to the productive sector.

The second activity during the current phase of the programme, and in a sense the counterpart of the foregoing, took place in March. A *European expert mission* comprising four renowned experts divided into two groups, accompanied by Latin American colleagues, visited 20 universities in Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Chile to gain a detailed understanding of activities entailing cooperation with the productive sector in the region. This mission made it possible to select a number of positive experiences, little known on the continent itself to identify critical problems hampering the development of cooperation with the productive sector with a view to inclusion as priority issues in the programmes of work, and to pinpoint potentially favourable areas for pilot experiments.

The third activity during this phase was the *Caracas seminar on university-productive sector cooperation* held from 27 to 31 May. It was

1. Activities during this phase were carried out thanks to substantial financial support from the *Commission of the European Communities*. Since its inception, *Project Columbus* has also received continuous support from UNESCO, which finances part of the programme's coordination costs. The *Ibero-American Cooperation Institute* and the *Comisión Nacional Quinto Centenario de España*, together with Portuguese governmental institutions, have likewise contributed to the implementation of programme activities. The *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)* and the *Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)*, initially approached by UNESCO, have for their part expressed the possibility of supporting part of the *Project Columbus* activities in the future. This support will be essential in setting up university sub-networks with shared priorities and strategies that will seek to solve specific problems with the help of European institutions and experts.

attended by 60 Latin Americans, representing 26 establishments of higher education in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela, and 15 Europeans, representing institutions in Belgium, Spain, France, Great Britain, Holland, Italy, Portugal, Federal Republic of Germany and Switzerland. Thanks to the seminar, common problems were identified and appropriate strategies and tools designed to resolve them. In addition to the concrete plans of action drafted by the institutions present, it was proposed that in the future, a considerable proportion of the programme's efforts be directed at organizing consortia of universities in both regions in order to jointly carry out pilot activities in areas given similar priority.

What tangible results have been obtained in this new stage of *Project Columbus*? Thanks to members' constancy, it has been possible to develop a common language and compatible expectations. Member universities were thus able to reflect on their own specificity and place their own problems and strategies in a new perspective. This is true both in the field of academic planning and evaluation and in relation with the productive sector.

III

In the field of academic evaluation and planning, virtually all the universities taking part in the above activities intended to foster processes of academic planning and evaluation as a means of raising the standard of their graduates and keeping their prestigious image. They all encouraged an in-house debate to discuss and implement evaluation policies. In some cases, this process was institutionalized, for example at a political level, through the creation of a commission within the Board of Governors or university Senate; at teacher level, by setting up academic bodies to discuss and implement methods of evaluation, and design appropriate tools; or at a technical level by creating Educational Advisory Services to start

up academic evaluation projects and strategic plans for the university in question. In a few cases, the objectives are broad: for example, to generate a standard-making body for the teaching profession. In others, the aims sought are very specific: to retain more students in critical fields of study, or to enable professors with great prestige but no practical possibilities of fulfilling their responsibilities in a given chair to stand down for the sake of new generations of teachers.

Evaluation plans also cover research and administration. One university decided to hire an external evaluator to take a fresh look at plans and policies.

Another equally important dimension of these changes was to include the educational authorities in the discussion on new evaluation strategies. The case of Chile is enlightening in this respect. In August, a seminar will be held with European experts who will be travelling to Chile for the *Valparaiso workshop on academic evaluation* in order to discuss the designing of new national academic evaluation policies with those responsible for higher education in Chile.

IV

In the field of cooperation with the productive sector, many universities began to discuss the benefits of cooperation and the most appropriate fora for achieving more flexible cooperation with the productive sector (creation of foundations, etc.), with the groups of teachers and researchers naturally interested (engineering, chemistry, physics, etc.). In analyzing their policies, some universities decided to encourage efforts in the field of continuous education and vocational training, while others decided that their strategies should be based on increasing the number of applied research projects. Others, finally, are convinced that it is the high standard of their basic research teams that will make them attractive to the productive sector. In all these developments,

it will be important to strengthen the university's own R&D managerial capacity.

One of the universities involved drafted new statutes on relations between the university and the productive sector, including rules governing the attributes of scientific and academic staff and greater flexibility in the payment of fees for outside contracts. Other universities are currently involved in a debate on the most suitable incentives and the way to extend the benefits of cooperation to other non-technical branches.

No fewer than eight universities have decided to create promotion and development or transfer offices and have appointed full-time managerial staff to run them. Of the tasks first assigned to these new offices, drawing up an inventory of resources relevant in cooperation with the productive sector and reviewing marketing strategies in order to gain easier access to the recipients of transfers of know-how and services deserve special mention. In one instance, periodic meetings between university and business have been institutionalized.

An interesting effect worthy of comment is the repercussion of these initiatives on business circles, which in some cases have opened up their publications to university opinion. Businessmen in Salta province, Argentina, decided together to create a private foundation to foster cooperation with the university, which has a seat on its Board of Directors.

External fundraising is a key motivation for universities. Some have begun to draw closer to industry by drafting external fundraising programmes. In a few instances, the increase in transfer activities occurred more quickly than expected. The University of La Plata reported that it foresaw a 50% increase this year over last year; even more significant, it notes an increase in the technological complexity of the products and services transferred.

In general, the universities hope outside cooperation will revitalize university activi-

ties, and in particular channel many research endeavours. The outside income obtained will make it possible to strengthen the budget of certain academic units and retain a larger number of professionals.

An encouraging aspect of the effects observed, although not obvious at first, is that the programme appears attractive to universities with very different characteristics: big and small, public and private, classical and technical, metropolitan and provincial. Proof of the fact is the heterogeneous nature of the institutions represented in Caracas. The results obtained in a short period of time and their innovative character augur well for the results of the four activities planned for the next few months.²

V

To pinpoint problems, develop strategies, oversee ways and means. Yet the conflict between our expectations and daily reality reminds us the limits of *Zweckrationalität*.

Europe, no longer bound by scapegoat images and without the traditional, safe references to nation, race or class, is preparing to build its common house before having even elucidated its collective responsibility towards others, less privileged parts of the world. How broad, how high will community borders be?

2. The activities planned are: Valparaiso workshop on academic planning and evaluation strategies to be held in the Catholic University of Valparaiso, 26-30 August; Costa Rica symposium on intellectual property, university and industry in Latin America organized jointly with the *World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)*, to be held at the University of Costa Rica, 17-22 September; second visit of Latin American rectors to European universities. In the light of the experience of the first visit, it will be devoted to a single theme, namely cooperation with the productive sector. The visit will comprise Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian and Swiss universities; meeting on information systems for university management to be held at the UNYSIS Training Centre in Sain-Paul-de-Vence, 14-16 January 1991.

In Latin America, an economic crisis, rooted in the uncontrolled growth of international indebtedness and compounded by unequal flows of international trade, affects the amount of public expenditure and private investment. From the vantage point of the late '80s, it is inevitable that the problems of twenty years ago look different. In the '60s, people spoke of the lack of economic integration on the continent; now, one cannot but refer to the disintegration of production lines. The total dependence of Latin American exports on raw materials used to be a source of concern; now, at least three countries in the region base their economies on drug trafficking. We tended to refer to the marginal status of the poorest sectors of the population; today, the existence of middle classes is being called into question. If the current circumstances continue, it is realistic to expect an even greater deterioration in Latin American societies. In that case, how much poverty, how much social violence can the new Latin American democracies withstand?

Unless Europe is prepared in the long term to pay the price of sidestepping Latin America in the quest for global solutions, it would be mistaken to view these Latin American problems as totally alien. Today, geographic dis-

tances are more than ever before an illusion. The trees cut in the Amazon or the coca planted in Peruvian valleys have the same impact on Europe's future as religious persecution in India on the fate of the community of Leicester. That is, a considerable one.

Like Italo Calvino, we can say there are two possible attitudes. "To seek and know how to recognize who and what, in the midst of this hell, is not hell and to make it last and give it space" does not necessarily imply a solitary adventure nor does it conceal a useless gesture. In the Latin American context described above, the conflict between hopes and realities can foster the development of critical and pragmatic attitudes that are helpful in the quest for new prospects and solutions. As is the case in other fields of reality, the universities can also benefit from a new experimental spirit. Thus, strengthening the institution, bolstering its ability to think for itself, endowing it with the means to achieve its own development, can help break the vicious circle of scepticism and uncertainty. Our efforts can be instrumental in strengthening positive experiences which in due course will become models for action on larger scale. This is our special way of journeying through hell.