

Five Turn-of-the-century University Dilemmas

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1. University and government in Uruguay: a brief state of the matter.

The Uruguayan university proto-system, which had been exceptional until recently because of the monopoly of the state University¹ (Universidad de la República), still maintains features that distinguish it in the world scenario. Even though there are four private Universities and several private institutes created mainly since the year 1995, it is difficult to use the term “system” in a strict sense. This is so because of the lack of articulation between such “system’s” components and for the hegemonic status which the state University still has. In fact, this University concentrates ninety per cent of the total number of university students, two thirds of the academic research generated in the country and also retains a paramount historical and symbolic legacy²

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1 From now on: UdelaR.

2 More specifically, the UdelaR has 70,156 students, 4,990 employees and 7,120 teachers, of those, only the 16% is exclusively working for the University or works at least 40hs. per week. (Source: Dirección General de Planeamiento. Estadísticas Básicas de la Universidad de la República. UdelaR, Montevideo, 2001). The UdelaR is directed by a Central Directory Board (Consejo Directivo Central), which is composed by the Dean (Principal of the University), representatives of the three orders (teachers, students, graduates) and by the Deans of the 13 existing Schools.

The University is, also, an institution that is known by its co-government regime (students, teachers and graduates) its Schools structure, and a totally free and unrestricted access to license education.

Regarding its institutional status, it's relevant to point out the University's condition as a non-departmental public body ("ente autónomo"), together with the lack of government capacities in the subject of higher education; the government's (institutional) capacities are limited to the regulation of the private sector.

Thus, because of it's relative size, it's tradition and it's legal nature, in a context of incipient and reduced development of the private sector, together with the alienation of the government, the UdelaR becomes "THE" University, a gravity center so prominent that practically makes of it the system all by itself. Consequently, the UdelaR policies and problems are the problems and policies of the whole higher education.

The traditional configuration of the system has been developed during one and a half centuries and was reconfigured under the Organic Law of the year 1958 which is currently in effect. It now has to adapt to profound, global changes in a multiplicity of aspects that configure its context of activity. It is necessary to point out at least four of them: the scientific-technological revolution, the public management reform, the new role of international financial agencies and the globalization phenomenon. These four aspects will be succinctly developed next.

The issue of change in the modes of production and reproduction of knowledge is frequent in any analysis pretending to explain current social dynamics. Such changes do not only affect the praxis of the scientific community, but also are linked to many other matters, such as the new requirements of the productive system, the re-structuring of jobs and pedagogical innovation, etc. all of which have an obvious repercussion in University institutions. This is perceived in a wide arc of activities, which includes the definition of the graduate's profiles, curricula planning, the objects, methods and ends of research and the extension of knowledge to the community.

On the other hand, the political scenario that provides the framework for public Universities has also changed significantly. The severe crisis of the “Welfare States” and their gradual substitution by more modest forms of State intervention, together with the introduction of new public managements models imported from private enterprises, question directly the management, financing and the mission of academic institutions. Particularly in Latin America, most governments show a tendency to reduce public spending and to focalize the remaining social spending to the most underprivileged sectors (basic education, feeding plans, health care). Thus questioning both the legitimacy and cost of tax-funded superior studies as well as the administration of those funds by autonomous Universities.

The World Bank has been a catalyst for this political process, especially in the arena of University policies. Since the 1990’s this institution has dramatically increased its intervention in this arena, translating more general lines of state reform into immediate application measures. (Tuitions, state evaluation, promotion of the private sector, etc.) which were implemented through specific loans and also by conditioning their backup of the macroeconomic orientation of national states. Therefore, funding was channeled to the governments of many countries of the region in order to strengthen the role of central bureaucracies in the definition and implementation of reform policies in the University system. Also, conditions regarding the development of specific policies (restrictions to students access to Universities, imposition of tuition fees, etc.) were included in the letters of intent (“cartas intención”), which controlled the application for fresh funding for these countries’ national economies.

Lastly, it is relevant to note a recent development, which is the idea of including higher education as a service to negotiate in the next round of the WTO. Following a proposal made by the US. and some European countries, the liberalization of the University sector will be placed on the trading desk. If this initiative succeeds it will allow for the installation of foreign universities in less developed countries without those countries having any mechanisms of control over the quality and relevance of curricula and educative practices of said institutions.

As an answer to this dynamic in the contextual variables of higher education and to others belonging to the own Uruguayan system, there has been many innovations of note in the late years, in the form of both government policies and initiatives adopted by the UdelaR. These initiatives generate tension to some of the long-term characteristics referred in the beginning of this article.

The main government policies regarding the University area were: the “freezing” of the UdelaR budget, legal authorization to charge tuition fees, creation of a graduate student tax (Solidarity Fund -“Fondo de Solidaridad”-) destined to the funding of student scholarships and followed by an additional increment to it whose proceedings benefits the state University, the creation of an economic incentive to the most prominent academic researchers (National Researchers Fund-“Fondo Nacional de Investigadores”-) and the consecration of an institutional system that enables the activity of private institutions, which constitutes a way to promote the private sub sector. ³

In turn, the UdelaR has created two new Schools (School of Sciences and School of Social Sciences) as well as many central commissions (Teaching commission, Extension and Activities⁴ in the Community commission) which added to the pre-existent Scientific Research Commission (“Comisión de Investigación Científica”). The University also developed new post-graduate courses and regulated them including charging a fee in some specific cases, established the Academic Areas that group different schools, topic related units (UVIS) and topic-oriented networks, and conformed a consulting social commission (“Comisión Social Consultiva”). The UdelaR has also expanded its relationship with many public and private companies, increasing the number of cooperation agreements. In addition to this, it has re-structured its own management, institutionalizing pro-deans by a function criterion and formed a Delegate Executive Council which helps the Central Directory Board in its paperwork functions.

Even though the mentioned array of measures cannot be overlooked, many fundamental aspects that would require specific policies to be adopted by the government,

³ These aspects are developed more thoroughly in Bentancur (2002a).

⁴ “Comisión de Enseñanza”, “Comisión de Extensión y Actividades en el Medio”

the University or booth, have not entered their decision agendas yet. What is more, many issues that had been included in the agenda have not been materialized into decisions and norms. Without any doubt the University issue is far behind in the list of priorities of the government's agenda. This so because of objective factors connected to the severity of the current social and economic crisis, and others, subjective ones, related to the lack of relevance that past governments have assigned to education and specifically to the state University.

Said institution, in turn, shows a certain slowness to process change, which could be associated to the traditional conservative bent of the higher studies institutions, but also its own difficulties for internal political negotiation (among the different government orders and among Schools) in a context of financial shortage. Thus, many crucial options open inside and outside the academic walls and claim for the adoption of strategic decisions.

2. The dilemmas of University policies.

According to the Spanish Royal Academy Dictionary (“Diccionario de la Lengua de la Real Academia Española”), a dilemma is an “argument formed of two contrary propositions in such way that, any of which being denied or conceded it is proven what was intended to prove”.⁵

We assume the partial artificiality of the oppositions that we are going to establish. Such is done for presentation purposes only. Of course, the available courses of action include hybrid solutions and other ideas that go beyond the basic dichotomies. However, we understand that the issues and alternatives that will be presented in this work define basic strategic aspects of University government.

Following we selected five of the said dilemmas, which appear of particular significance, even though they do not cover the complete range of relevant issues in this discussion.

⁵ In the original: “Diccionario de la Lengua de la Real Academia Española, un dilema es un `argumento formado de dos proposiciones contrarias disyuntivamente, con tal artificio, que negada o concedida cualquiera de las dos, queda demostrado lo que se intenta probar´”. (Translator's note)

First dilemma. It is connected with the problem of co-ordination and direction of the higher education system. *Which is the mechanism that would ensure definite quality standards to the University institutions and curricula, as well as a reasonable level of coordination among public and private centers?*

This topic has acquired special relevance in Uruguay since the inauguration in the last years of many private Universities and private higher education institutes.

According to international experience, these systems can be regulated by the state with different degrees of intensity. Or it may be self-regulated by the universities themselves, individually or via a voluntary association of them.

Plainly said, faced with the leniency or non-existence of state controls (evaluations, institutional endorsement, curricula and career approval) the elements of the market are the ones who effectively come to regulate university life. In this way, the research programs will have to concur with the technological transfer needs of the productive sector and the teaching plans will be consequent with the requirements of the professional market,

In reductionist terms, what will be taught and researched will be the socially “useful” in the short term, determined by the demand of students and private companies.⁶

The state-market opposition has ended up favoring the first in the main countries of continental Europe and in most of Latin America, while the market is favored in the Anglo-Saxon world and –more closely- in Chile since the University reform processed in the eighties. This panorama is even more complex in our region because the function of state orientation is not taken up by national governments (as it happens in Germany or France) but by completely autonomous public universities. These universities had been the gravity centers and reference points for the remaining institutions in the system. Some examples of note are the Mexican National Autonomous University (“Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México”), the Buenos Aires University (“Universidad de Buenos Aires”) and, though in

⁶ In the most quoted work about this issue, Clark (1983) makes a chart of the coordination systems with a triangle whose vertexs are the state authority, the market, and what he calls the “academy oligarchy”. Each national system can be located in any interior point of the triangle, according to its proximity or not to each of the vertexs, this is, each factor’s incidence in government.

a different scale, our own Universidad de la República, this last reinforced in its function by its historical monopoly. In the nineties, the equilibrium in state regulated systems change. National governments start to act directly, creating specialized agencies to promote university policies, specially focusing on the endorsement of new institutions, orienting finance and promoting university-company links. Naturally, this leading role of the government has clashed with the traditional autonomous constitutions of public Universities in countries like Argentina, Brazil and Mexico.

In Uruguay, the UdelaR monopoly has been maintained in the public sub sector, but it now has to coexist with new private universities. As a way of coordinating the incipient system, the Executive Branch established with decree 308 in the year 1995 a non-too-demanding set of standards of procedures for endorsement and later evaluation of private institutions. In this procedure the leading role is played by the Private Tertiary Education Consultive Board (“Consejo Consultivo de la Enseñanza Terciaria Privada”), this is an organism integrated by representatives of the Ministry of Education, ANEP, the UdelaR and the same institutions that it is created to regulate. This organism is just a consulting agency, as the Education Minister is the one which finally decides about authorization for institutions and careers, without being mandated by the decisions of the Council.

The integration of said Council which put the supervision of the private tertiary education under the scope of the Executive Branch, and later the Council’s practice and decisions were object of repeated arguments between the national government and the UdelaR. The University claimed for itself the role of public regulatory organism (this claim was rejected in a legal instance), later the University pledged for a stronger quality control of private institutions. As a consequence, the UdelaR delegation did not attend to Council meetings for a long period, and even after it did, the UdelaR representatives disagreed with the criteria employed by the Executive in many occasions. It must be acknowledged that, after the five-year period in which the authorization of private university institutions was provisional had elapsed, the Ministry did not establish any effective system for monitoring and evaluation

(On the other hand, it was never given the necessary human, financial and structural resources.) Even more, the person who had recently been the Executive's representative at the Council has manifested of late about the unconstitutional character of the organism and the regulatory competencies it had been assigned with⁷. The Minister of Education himself has also manifested his skepticism about the state regulating mechanisms and his trust in that the sole students demand will determine the survival of quality private universities and eliminate the others.⁸

In facts, this relaxation of a pretended government-coordinated system opens the way to a market-driven orientation of private universities activity. Regarding post-secondary education, there are many analysis that point out "market failures" that inhibit the same people who demand such services to capably regulate them. These arguments are especially valid for a space in the scale of the Uruguayan market. It is difficult to uphold state-endorsed private universities giving professional titles, particularly in disciplines of direct impact over important social and individual goods related to its practice, without any form of effective quality and relevance control of the competences of the graduate, but for his own personal option at the moment of selecting an academy to study.

Additionally, one argument that is usually reserved because of its sensitive matter but should be stated here: the student in a private institution is at the same time its client and as such, the financer of the institution's activities. This objectively makes for a situation in which the economical welfare of the educative center is determined by student

⁷ In the judgement of Augusto Durán Martínez, former president of the Council, the regulating decree was good to end the "... aberrant monopoly... (of the Udelar)" but has got "... some inconstitucionalities...", as, for example allowing the Udelar to have an "overriding participation in private education issues..." "... there are people who have lived in the environment and culture of totalitarianism and do not know what is the sphere of liberty. Their obsession for control is overreaching. The market is wise and the market regulates well". (*Búsqueda*, november 8th, 2001, page 17).

⁸ "Control systems, inspective systems, of a police-like tender have never been adequate to guarantee academic quality (...) we have to encourage an increase in the offer because that is what a modern world requires, the new demands, the need for new careers, that is what people claim for, because these people attend to private universities for a reason..." (*El País*, October 22nd, 2001).

retention and their ensuing following and culmination of their studies. As far as the state is going to endorse such professional, authorizing him/her for the practice of his/her a discipline, it is necessary that the state also check whether the institution's demands have not yielded to said economical conditioning. Observations like these have been collected even in systems where a clearly neoliberal reform has been implemented. Such is the case of the aforementioned Chile, where the proliferation of academic centers of dubious quality has led to the installation of state procedures for institution endorsement.

Now, even though we could share the critics to the market coordination system, it is still pending the definition of which state organization should take care of this task in our country. As we already have stated, the UdelaR itself has its competence to regulate the whole university system. In our opinion and considering the current state of development of the system, it would not be convenient that the main University be at the same time "judge and party" in this conflict. It is necessary to discriminate, then, between the University's reasonable claim for adequate standards and rigorous endorsement procedures from other monopolic reflexes already overcome by the present reality. Alternatively, taking into account the magnitude of the UdelaR's accumulated know-how and academic resources, it's impossible to ignore the input that it could provide in a better-structured state (or para-state) coordination system.

In order to make this possible, it should be ensured the mandatory quality of the judgment of academic evaluators regarding Ministry decisions, as well as the conformation of a independent technical team in the state sphere, this team able to professionally manage both endorsement and period evaluations of private Universities and private academic institutions. Multiple experiences of this nature have been generated in the last decade in countries faced with similar problems, what has been learned from these experiences could be capitalized in Uruguay with ample profit.

Second dilemma. About the institutional space that the UdelaR should occupy in the network of public education. *Here the alternatives are the constriction and defense of a specific "radius of action" for post-secondary education or the undertaking of a greater commitment with the education system as a whole.*

In the World Conference on Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century, which took place in Paris in 1998, it was stressed that the needs of this sector should not be considered isolatedly, but as a part of an inter-connected system in which a change in one of the parts has an intimate effect in all the rest. Specifically, it was proposed a new “academic pact” for the Universities of the world in such a way that they contribute to the rest of the educative system through counseling, support and cooperation for renewal in teacher formation and development, in the curricula and improving teaching and evaluation processes (UNESCO 1998a).

In Uruguay such commitment of the UdelaR with the rest of the educative system could be channeled by agreements *vis a vis* between the ruling entity for primary and secondary education (ANEP), or through the Education Coordinating Commission, an organism created in the 1967 Constitution and regulated by the Law N° 15.739. The Commission is integrated by representatives of the Ministry of Education, ANEP, UdelaR and of private education, and has among other competences the role of coordinating and evaluating public education. This commission was inactive for long years, until the year 2000 in which it took more public relevance thanks to the initiative of the Education Minister, who took advantage of the scenario to incorporate inside his office debates originally belonging to autonomous educative institutions. These debates include issues such as value-oriented teaching, public financing of private education, teacher development and student strikes. In the current working dynamics of the systems it is not likely that the Coordinating Commission could advance significant agreements among different actors, but in the future that (already established) institutional arena could be apt to define coordinated policies.

Among such policies involving the University and other strata of public education are the constitution of a higher education system able to incorporate in an organic array the offer already established and new entities, such as higher technological education institutes or polytechnics, to the which the UdelaR could work as a sort of incubator. The latter is up to this moment one the most important lacks of national education, one that “closes” substantially the range of post-secondary options, restricting the possibilities of qualified

formation for the job market and impacting indirectly to University massification. Likewise, the University could join forces with ANEP to determine the collection of knowledge necessary for students entering university, making curricula and plans compatible with High School Diplomas and designing joint methods of evaluation, as it is currently the practice in many European countries. This issue is especially important as far as there are no selection processes for higher education admission; so, the UdelaR inherits directly all the lacks of the formation from former instances. Lastly, it would be important to review our traditional “normalist” option regarding teacher development, which has separated the higher house of studies from that task. Even without a substitution of the current model, it seems timely to explore more flexible modes of collaboration between the University and the teacher development institutes.

All these endeavors and others that could surely be added to the list require that the different authorities of the educative system have the will to act together. To remove the University from its current situation of relative isolation it is necessary to recreate an atmosphere of trust and cooperation among the parts that ensures respect for their different autonomies and enables cooperative rationale.

Third dilemma. About UdelaR’s model of academic organization *There is a clash between the traditional professionalist model of Napoleonic inspiration, designed upon a Schools structure, established in the Organic Law “Ley Orgánica” of the year 1908 and in its substantial components still in effect; vs. The American model of “community colleges” specifically conceived to expand tertiary education coverage which –generally even without being named as an inspirational source- lies in the base of all proposals being considered as an improvement of the latter.*⁹ In a good sense (though not only because of it)

⁹ These establishments shelter a third part of american students and are the only section of a complex tertiary system which is still growing in the U.S. (Their system is composed also by large Universities devoted mainly to research and the Arts and Sciences Colleges for grade formation. The community colleges have unrestricted access for those who have completed secondary education and offer two-year programmes with a quick insertion in the job market, as well as liberal art courses which are geared towards providing for general education and function as a “transference curriculum” for those who want to move on to another institution to complete a four-year course and obtain a bachelor’s diploma” (Altbach 2001: 130).

the passage from one model to the other is informed by the international process of diversification and segmenting of higher education which belongs to a stage of Universities for the masses.

In this paper we will develop only one aspect of this discussion, the one related with education up to a graduate's degree. The critics to its current forms of organization are well known: rigid curricula, excessive compartmentalization of the institution, multiplication and superposition of courses, lack of mid-career degrees and a total absence of options for the student to decide on the profile of his/her studies.

As an alternative to this configuration, back in 1967, the so called "Plan Maggiolo" which was presented by the principal of that time proposed the creation of Central Institutes grouped by discipline and Coordination Centers to link different Schools. Nowadays, the newer proposals which are centered around the constitution of common basic courses, a credits system, horizontal movement among careers, and other measures. These have been presented by different actors and circulated through a plethora of University scenarios.¹⁰ These kind of initiatives coexist with students' demands of a more diffuse, and usually contradictory, nature. Such demands look upon more general matters in the definition of the role of grade education and specifically in the construction of a definite graduates profile. Thus, the complains for a greater curricular flexibilization and a more "generalist" formation live together with other demands claiming for a more specific training in each of the specific discipline fields which would enable an earlier and less traumatic insertion in the job market. In the background of this debate there is a question difficult to answer: Should grade education aim to the formation of a graduate with generic capabilities to be developed later in the post-graduate stage? Or, conversely, should it aim for the preparation of professionals with the necessary knowledge for a full and immediate practice of their chosen specialty.

¹⁰ We can count among these proposals the so called "The Four Deans Document" ("Documento de los Cuatro Decanos") (1993) and the curricular document "Consensus for the transformation of the UdelaR" ("Consenso para la transformación de la Universidad de la República"), approved by the Central Directive Board in December 1999 which includes many of the mentioned initiatives in its chapter about teaching.

Most eclectic answers, despite their rhetorical flair, rarely account for the depth and complexity of this dilemma that affects all the systems of higher education in Latin America.¹¹ Both the well known needs of high school education and the growing demands for specialization coming from the professional market, gear us towards the transformation of grade studies into cycles that aim for the transmission of general knowledge and the acquisition of basic skills that should later be developed in post-graduate studies. This “dumbing down” of demands in the first University stage is, in part, a tribute to the deficiencies of previous formation. In a way a “escaping forward” which will remedy the lacks of the secondary cycle in the tertiary stage

In turn, this would imply placing a bet in the qualification that could be granted by a later stage (specializations, masters, etc.), where the formation of highly qualified human resources would finally be achieved.

On the contrary, the socio-economical conditions of Latin American countries and the high average age at the moment of graduation are elements that force institutions to set an earlier accumulation of knowledge that enable graduates a quick exit into the job market, if only in a partial manner and doing activities only marginally adequate to their graduate profile. As a backdrop to this issue, a frequently disregarded aspect in these discussions is that in our country only public *grade* education has unrestricted access and is free of charge, whereas in the later stages candidates are selected and tuition fees can eventually be charged according to the “Post-graduate Ordinance of the UdelaR” of the year 200. (“Ordenanza de Posgrados de la UdelaR) So, by their definition the post-graduate courses will cover a relatively reduced percentage of the total mass of University students.

¹¹ Again, one example of these positions can be found in the aforementioned document “Consensus for the transformation of the UdelaR” (“Consensos para la transformación de la Universidad de la República”) which proposes a reduction in the lengths of the careers, horizontal student mobility among careers, curricular flexibility and at the same time to “empower the student with a global formation, not conditioned to his latter insertion in a post-graduate course”. The mentioned document can be consulted in “UdelaR, Memory of the University 1999-2000” (“Memoria de la Universidad 1999-2000”, Documentos de Trabajo del Rectorado n° 6, Montevideo, 2000.)

Therefore, the passage from one organizational model to another must carefully gauge its possible impacts in finalist matters as the ones referred before, and not reduce itself to the intuitively sharable argument of offering a wider range of curricular options to the students

Fourth Dilemma. As we shall see, this dilemmatic option is related to the last one. The fall in the budget/student ration that was experimented by the UdelaR, as a consequence of the relative “freezing” of state contributions in the latter decade, (already insufficient since the beginning of the period) and the drastic increase in the number of students, exacerbates the stress that exists between quality of education and the amplitude of its coverage.¹²

Up to what moment can the institution compatibilize the demand for a quality education in a situation of massification, underpaid teachers and neglected physical infrastructure?

In a document of the year 1995, the UNESCO posted as guiding principles for higher education relevance, quality and internationalization. The first refers to the role that the tertiary system has in each society, in its contribution to the resolution of their most urgent problems, as means for social mobility and for the connection of the individuals to the job market. Quality, in turn, is understood as a multidimensional concept that involves staff, curricula, learning, students, infrastructure and the institutional environment. In a similar register, the former Dean Jorge Brovetto (1994) identified three principal values of the University practice: excellence, relevance and equity. As a consequence of the equity principle it is understood that “... the public University must open its access to knowledge to each and every one who has satisfactorily completed the previous stages...”

¹² The increase in the number of University students is slow but continuous: between the cenci of the years 1988 and 1999 there is an increment of more than 14%. Source: “Oficina del Censo Universitario y Dirección General de Planeamiento” (2001): *Estadísticas Básicas de la Universidad de la República*, UdelaR, Montevideo.

As is well known, access to the UdelaR has been traditionally unrestricted to those who complete their secondary studies, with the exception of a brief period during the military intervention of the University, when an admission exam was administered. This policy is clearly oriented by an equity principle, for it gives everybody the same opportunity to participate in higher education. However, contemplating the current conditions in which courses are taught in the majority of the University's schools, specially in the first years of each career, it becomes evident that such openness has an impact in the quality of the resulting teaching. The panorama is familiar: classes taught in big rooms or even in locations not specifically designed for teaching (cinemas, amphitheatres, etc.), that even then usually are not ample enough to allow access to all enrolled students, an extremely low teacher/student ratio, and, as a consequence, a methodology of teacher-centered presentations with almost nil possibilities of exchange with students. Thus, there is selectiveness in an indirect fashion, this due to students' dropout in their first stages, a clearly unwanted adjustment mechanism. Besides, unlimited access and its consequent massification are usually connected with other indicators of University efficiency these showing the low performance of the institution, high desertion rates, career-completion times far longer than expected and unemployment among University graduates, particularly in some professions.

An apparently effective solution would be, then, limiting the students' access in search of a smaller, cheaper and more efficient University, such as is proposed by agencies like the World Bank (1993). We do not consider this to be an adequate measure in our country, for many reasons. First, the international tendency is just the opposite, developed countries aim towards the universalization of tertiary education and in their march towards that goal some of them have already overcome the 60% barrier of the corresponding age group. In Uruguay that coverage is a mere 29%¹³, the concept of massification, then must be looked at in relative terms. This is so because of the limited offer of non-university public tertiary education with overloads the demand in the UdelaR and also due to the amount of public investment in higher education, an aspect that will be tackled in the next

¹³ Source: UNESCO, *Educative Statistics, year 1996* "Estadísticas Educativas año 1996" (at www.unesco.org).

item. In other words: if there were a more complex, public, higher education system and the UdelaR had greater resources to provide for teaching positions of middle and full dedication, their massification would not exist. A second argument against a limit to students access comes from the experiences of evaluation of students' knowledge done by some University services: the students that would not be admitted if there were an admission exam, some years later have a similar performance than the rest of the students. This shows both the inequity of installing a selection process in an early stage, in which only the skills acquired in secondary formations of different qualities could be measured (which would put the students who could not study at the best centers in a position of disadvantage) and the compensating aptitude of University studying. Lastly, a measurement of University efficiency just in terms of number of graduates and attending years is, in our country, a narrow perspective. In a context of high young unemployment figures, the University does not only produce graduates, also is of public value in preserving its socializing and emotional support of the young who, even not getting their diploma, or after that, can not work in their specific profession, employ their time productively and probably, will later see their levels of income increased because of the formation they received.¹⁴

Taking into account the social and academic reasons that disapprove the application of access limitation mechanisms, and also the political difficulties for the imposition of such barriers, many alternatives have been tried and proposed in order to keep a modicum of decency while teaching in a context of massification. One variable of adjustment has been the teaching staff, while in the last years the real University income has decreased, both the number of teaching positions and the number of hours of teaching dedication have been increased.¹⁵ Even if that measure had been aimed to stop the decay in the

¹⁴ Alternatively, other strategies in directing the students application could be implemented, via direction finding counselling and more systematic, personalized information on the tertiary curricula offer and the job market for different professions. Likewise, a mechanism that penalizes students for long periods of inactivity (for example, by setting an expiration date for courses approved) and for the repeated failure of courses and exams should also be considered.

¹⁵ The University teacher's income has decreased a 23% in real terms between the years 1989 and 1999. On the other hand, between 1990 and 2001 the number of teaching positions has grown by 10% and the number of hours of teacher dedication a 24% (Brovetto 2001).

teacher/student ratio, it is expected that if laboral conditions are affected this will have a negative impact on the teacher's dedication to his/her role and, consequently in the quality of the teaching involved. Remedial measures like the creation of new positions in a full-time regime are timely but quantitatively insufficient to break this vicious circle of decay.

Another solution to this problem can be found in re-structuring the grade teaching that the UdelaR provides. In the beginning of this item we said that the search for balance between the terms quality/equity are connected to the former tendency, of a passage towards a more flexible and less "professionalist" model. This is so because one possible remedy to the current situation of an increasing demand with constant resources is to apply scale economies, generalizing the basic cycles (and their potential function of a student "filter"), rationalizing the offer of courses of different academic units and making grade careers shorter. In this way a first instance of formation could be achieved with a lesser cost for each student, explicitly assuming the consequent loss in terms of quality through lowering the demands of the first university cycle. Obviously, the price of keeping the delicate balance in this wager is very high, this alternative solves the demands in both terms in two different moments. A grade open to all but of limited professional formation and a more qualified but selective post-graduate offer. Quality is lost in the first instance and equity-understood as a universalistic prestation of the service-in the second.

As can be appreciated, the resolution of this dilemma is not easy, for a very simple reason: it is almost impossible to have a University with few resources, unrestricted access and high academic quality. Without altering financing or the public education offer one of these terms is sacrificed, and everything makes one think that until this moment the one affected is the level of the education.¹⁶ Albeit definite solutions are not at hand, understanding this tension between the poles of equity and quality enables a more aware analysis of the measures taken (and of those omitted).

¹⁶ Naturally, the UdelaR has an important historical accumulation that make this decay less pronounced than expected. However, this credit will not last forever.

Fifth dilemma. Public universities financing is connected, as could be seen above to many strategic debates. *If the resources available today are not sufficient. How should an increase be financed? What responsibilities should the State and the private individuals take? Is a tuition fee a good solution?*

The discussion about this issue in international organisms has been centered in the different contributions that the public sector and the university users should take up in their financing. Where the World Bank advocates that public investment must be directed to basic education and university education needs to receive more private income through the charging of tuition fees and the sell of different services, UNESCO has pronounced itself for a hybrid financing system, inside of which public support should preserve its essential role or even be reinforced (World Bank 1993; UNESCO 1998b).

Let's see now the situation of public university finances in our country. The University budget amounts for a 0.6 of gross domestic product, a 20% of total educational spending and a 2.8% of public national spending. In the nineties this numbers had stayed relatively stable in relation to GDP, but its relative weight in the whole of education and as a part of state's spending was reduced in approximately a 20%. In comparative terms, inside the subcontinent the University spending/GDP ratio in Uruguay is slightly superior to the privatist Chile, similar to Argentina's and remarkably inferior to Mexico's and specially to, Brazil's, which adding its federal and estate strata spends more than 1% of its GDP in universities (Bentancur 2002b). The relation is even more disadvantageous if compared to the countries of greater human development: Norway, Australia, Canada and Sweden –the four first countries in that *ranking*– assign between a 2.4 to a 1.6% of their product to tertiary public education (PNUD 2001). Consequently, both in terms of historical evolution as of international comparison the public university spending in Uruguay appears insufficient.

What should be that level of financing? On its budget request of the year 2000, the UdelaR asked for a gradual increase up to reaching a mount of two hundred forty million dollars in the year 2004, this meaning a practical duplication of the budget assigned to it up

to date. As per the current situation of the national treasure and even what could be foreseen for the next years, it is unlikely that spending for that amount –even though it may be a justified expenditure- could be afforded. Then, more refined state-financing procedures should be found that through specific directions into specific areas defined by both the government and the UdelaR had a greater relative impact. In the last decade many Latin American countries have established special state funds to cover that function and in this way they have supported some research areas which were considered strategic for national development, developing high level human resources, improving university infrastructure and increasing the salaries of those employees with better performance and or more hours worked. As we have noted in another occasion (Bentancur 2000) this active intervention of governments in the definition of university priorities deserves taking some caution in order to preserve the autonomy of the institutions, but processed in a consensual manner by both actors it allows for a more rational use of resources in contexts of budget shortage and multiple social demands regarding public spending.

As for private financing, since the re-institution of democracy there has been an important increase in the amount corresponding to the sale of services by the UdelaR. (Counseling agreements or technological transfer, professional training courses. Specialization diplomas) in the absence of more accurate numbers, it is estimated that the amount earned through this kind of activities accounts for a 10% of the total university budget. Taking into account the dimensions of the local market, it is not likely that the amount of resources obtained in this way could be significantly increased.

On the other hand, more expectations have been generated in some sectors by the possibility of implementing a tuition fee for graduate studies. In fact, the political powers have manifested such intention explicitly to the UdelaR, legally authorizing the University for such decision in two occasions. (In the years 1990 and 1995) The education institute refused to implement it. In addition to the need of fresh funding, the promoters of these instrument point out the overrepresentation of high and middle social sectors (and, consequently, in conditions to pay for their studies) among the UdelaR students and the

greater incomes they will probably receive in the future as a consequence of the formation they get from the public institution.

The three statements can be questioned. First, a study conducted in 1995¹⁷ showed that, if a progressive fee were applied (from 50 to 150 dollars per month) to students whose families belong to the three quintils of higher income in the population, the potential collection would represent from ten to fifteen per cent of the university budget.

This is, implementing a complex political and administrative operation to set and collect a fee would only represent relatively modest resources to the University, which will not solve its basic needs.

The second argument pro charging a fee refers to the “capture” of the University by high and middle class sectors; these sectors are effectively over represented in the classrooms, in contrast with students that come from lower socio-economic sectors.¹⁸ The economical input of the better-positioned students would allow reducing university public spending, which could be re-oriented to other social objectives or increase the scholarship system benefiting their excluded peers. To ponder these reasons is necessary to answer two questions: Is the University responsible for the exclusion of its more modest students? and Would implementing a tuition fee improve equity in University access? The answer to the first question is clearly a negative one. As we have already pointed out above, the main instance of exclusion is previous to the students entrance to tertiary studies: according to data from CEPAL (2001), in 1998, 46% of Uruguayan young people of from 20 to 24 years-old (this is, inside the university age group) did not study at all and had less than ten years of formal instruction, this means: those people had not completed the pre-university cycle. Such desertion drastically reduces the universe of students in conditions to enter the University and, naturally, majoritarily selects those students that come from homes with better incomes.

¹⁷ CONICYT Comission– Universidad de la República (1995): *Alternativas para la financiación y recuperación de costos de la educación superior*, Montevideo.

¹⁸ While 47% of young people between 19 and 24 years old belong to the two lower income quintils, they only represent a 19% of the total number of University students (Dean’s Secretariat of the UdelaR, 2000).

The answer to the second question is less categorical. Possibly the constitution of a scholarship fund with the revenues of a tuition fee could improve, in incremental terms, equity in the access to the University. But, then again, the opposite impact of a fee in the middle sectors of the population should be carefully evaluated; the question is whether those sectors are really in conditions to pay for their studies, more than they are already paying through indirect costs (books, transport fares, etc.). This discussion refers us to a more general debate over the perverse effects of focalized social policies and public spending on lower income sectors, which we cannot recreate here.

So far, it is valid to ask whether extensive sectors of the Uruguayan middle classes would continue to be so if they did not get state support through a diversity of programs (social security, housing, health care, and, in the case of this discussion, education). Especially in economic conditions such as the present's, imposing a cost to university education can expel from the classrooms a good number of the same middle class students who were intended to be recruited to collaborate with the public financing of the University worsening even more the social composition of the student body.

Lastly, the argument for the future private returns of higher formation is, in our judgment, the stronger. Certainly, available studies show that who possess complete university studies get a positive income bonus, which means that their employers –specially in the private sector- pay a monetary premium for their professional quality (Bucheli 2000). It must be estimated, then, that university formation involves important public returns due to the contributions of better-qualified individuals to the society and accordingly it is reasonable that those studies are subventioned partly by the state; but they also involve private profit that in some way should return to the national treasures. The issue remaining is to determine the moment and form of that reimbursement. The student fee has the serious flaw of charging the student when the alleged wealth-generating fact has not yet taken place, this is, the University title. In this sense, *a posteriori* pay mechanisms such as the

already in effect graduate tax¹⁹ -notwithstanding any valid questioning remarks about its actual instrumentation - are more appropriate and equitable. Another possible form of alternative collection from the income plus of University graduates is their inclusion under the Personal Income Tax, up to this day nonexistent in our country

To sum up, as far as we are concerned public financing must continue being an essential pillar of the state University, its necessary increase will require adjusting the available fiscal resources and a certain strategic direction that allow establishing priorities and bring the institution closer to the demands of national development.

The private contribution is already being channeled towards the so called “Solidarity Fund” (“Fondo de Solidaridad”), which should be reformulated to adequate its amount to the real contributing capacity of the community, or else, replace it with a more general income tax. Any of these two mechanisms being in place, the imposition of a tuition fee will constitute an unjustified second charge for the use of the same public educative service.

3. Conclusion

The same dilemmatic structure with which we addressed the national university agenda now inhibits us from closing this approach with categorical conclusions. Nevertheless, out of the proposed review emerges a significant perspective of the most important institutional problems of the Uruguayan higher education: disconnection of the public and private segments, with scarce state supervision of the latter; segmentation and isolation in the different levels of the public education system; a reduced diversification of the public higher education offer; rigid curricula at UdelaR, with alternatives being processed that aim for a segmentation into different levels of unequal academic relevance; a negative impact in the quality and efficiency of the teaching provided by the UdelaR while

¹⁹ Law N° 16.524 of the year 1994 installed the “Solidarity Fund” (“Fondo de Solidaridad”), financed by the mandatory contribution of college graduates and whose revenue is destined to student scholarships. In the year 2000, law N° 17.296 set and addition to said tax which is send directly to the University coffers.

looking to achieve equity. All this in a context of severe material limitations and scarce public financing as possible private sources have already been tapped or have questionable origin and / or yield.

Acknowledging the gravity of these matters does not elude the complexity of the crossroads involved in its resolution, over which it has been succinctly elaborated. But be these statements shared or not, still remains the evidence that shoes the need for both the national government and the most important higher education institution, the University of the Republic, to formulate and implement strategic policies that lead to overcoming the present unsatisfactory situation, which has an effect in the formation of the autonomous resources. For these human beings, the best qualified in the country and, accordingly, the ones with greatest capacity for development, the worst policy would be, without any doubt, their omission or delay in the systematic making of strategic decisions.

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ABSTRACT

The Uruguayan university system has undergone important changes in recent years. However, certain crucial issues remain unresolved: a satisfactory accreditation system for private sector institutions, the link between the University of the Republic and the rest of the public education system, the academic organization of Bachelor degree studies, the alternatives ways of ensuring expanded, high-quality higher education, and the public and private funding methods that could contribute to achieving this. This article describes and reflects on the policy alternatives for these issues, highlighting the need for both the government and the University of the Republic to design and implement strategic policies to overcome the deficiencies in the current system, which are having a negative repercussions on the education of the country's most highly qualified human resources, and consequently on its potential for autonomous development.

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