



The curriculum as an articulator of the university's social commitment

Enrique Barés.

Received: March 2011 – Accepted: April 2011

- Profesor Titular regular Trabajo de Campo - Área Educativa – Facultad de Psicología - Universidad Nacional de Rosario.
- Profesor Titular regular Trabajo de Campo - Licenciatura en Ciencias de la Educación - Facultad de Humanidades y Artes - Universidad Nacional de Rosario.
- Docente-investigador. Cat. 2.
- Profesor Seminario Calidad y evaluación de la educación superior. Maestría en Docencia Universitaria, Universidad Tecnológica Nacional. Facultad Regional Rosario.
- Profesor Seminario La evaluación de la educación superior. Maestría en Gestión de la Educación Superior. Maestría en Gestión de la Educación Superior. Centro de Estudios Interdisciplinarios. Universidad Nacional de Rosario.
- Secretario Académico Universidad Nacional de Rosario.

E-mail: enriquebares@gmail.com

The curriculum design of University careers of degree constitutes the base document that supports the fundamental principles of institutional work, it also order the singular and collective effort of the actors and of the entire organizational structure, with the intention to achieve a *graduates' formation with wide cultural integration, capable and aware of their social responsibility, to guide the actions of the University to the complete training of women and men with social commitment and with high sense of republican ethics.*

The university's social responsibility is shown in the very object of its function: the production, management and legitimization of knowledge. In the process of constructing sense that involves the creation of new knowledge and the consecration of it, the university formulates problems and research issues, which are considered as scientists and which acquired, from there, some *legality* for all society. When those problems are setting up and certain events are recognized with the status of objects of science, it is established –before the society- "a statement of truth, historical, provisional truth, submitted –permanently- to criticism. The uninterrupted complexity of social, cultural, economic, political life causes the appearance of new problems, new needs that require new answers. Intellectual work that becomes from the approach of these issues is defined on the basis of an actors and institutions complex and dynamic studding that act like legitimators of the meanings assign to those events. We are speaking of the University and academic work that, precisely, they do. Critical thinking is related to scientific work, to the exercise of deconstruction and reconstruction of social meanings as regard the universe, the socio-cultural spaces and the ethical-political actors positioning. Dialectical hermeneutic and ethical-political reasons constitute the support of the critical role that intellectuals and university show to society. Through the construction of meaning that every academic tribe structures ⁽¹⁾, its members participate with a unique personality, investing the *habitus* that is inherent in a profession or a particular academic configuration. The intertwining of perspectives and symbolic constructions are as diverse as professions, specialities, sectors and branches of knowledge coexist in the university life; nevertheless, it is designed over a base that - beyond the diversity - defines the university being in the society. The incidence of knowledge in social life takes place through the diverse ways of thinking, questioning and proposing problems that are structured into the daily life of the community. The sociological substratum of the public legitimization of knowledge makes possible the

852

dimension of recognition of knowledge and the conceptual and professional practices of the university teachers and scholars in the different branches of their work.

It is interesting to analyze the intellectual dynamics verified in the process of constructing knowledge and, consequently, of the inclusion or exclusion of problematic areas as susceptible (or not) of being incorporated as fields of "academic" knowledge. The debates within the institutional structures of the academy occasionally become public and the society knows just the epiphenomenon of those disputes. As a consequence of these debates, the university organization also recognizes changes, creations, deletions, clumping or divisions of the structures that give support to knowledge: new careers, new degrees, schools turned into colleges, departments into schools are-perhaps-the most visible evidence of that dynamic.

The social, cultural, political and economic changes are verified in such rapid time that exceeded the time expectations of the organizations, including the university, and the amount of knowledge and the pace at which it occur are multiplied. Faced with this phenomenon, the university organization, like any organization, generates mechanisms, explicit and implicit, that assure its reproduction. This *conservative* dimension moderates the negative entropy and ensures the system stability giving it major integrity and solvency. Surely, each one of us, as regards the field of knowledge in which we find greater comfort, we could consider no less than a dozen fields of knowledge, implicitly or explicitly, excluded from our academic territories ⁽²⁾.

It is a question, then, of rethinking the curriculum to enable an opening towards knowledge, skills and competencies built and developed in other discipline areas, but that approach aspects or perspectives that enrich the point of view of the career of origin. There are no possibilities of attending each and every one of the current problematic areas and fields, much less the future ones without imagining new ways of knowledge management. The intertextuality, the multiplicity of views, the audacity of the questioning and the significant reconstruction of knowledge open up new opportunities if organizational forms-with there corresponding regulations-are deployed, which make it possible to weave a more complex plot. How can undergraduate courses be open to interdisciplinarity? How can be the new fields of knowledge open so that when they return to the careers hard core they could create new questions and activate the crystallized structures of the academy? As pointed out by Díaz Villa ⁽³⁾ *Thinking about flexibility with regard to students, for example, it allows to encourage and define the possibility that they have to decide on their different aspects, own or articulated, of their training process. This implies that the institutions of higher education must expand, in the degrees in which they consider right, the options choice offered to students in regard to training programs, courses, academic activities, learning strategies and educational technology , conferences, training courses, etc., and make the flexibility in curriculum and pedagogic the basic regulatory principle for the achievement of the essential professional training.*

Here, we are, against a first challenge: how to sustain the consolidation of the academic organization, and without impairing its solvency and continuity, find ways to facilitate the incorporation of new perspectives, new knowledge and new questions?

In addition, we should consider a process that seems inherent to knowledge, though it is not necessarily so. We refer to the fragmentation of fields of knowledge that lead to the establishment of new territories, areas that subsequently acquire a relative autonomy until they become new fields. And so, science has "progressed" cutting and trimming. Just remember Mephistopheles irony making fun of science in the dialogue with the medical student ... *science seeks to understand the bird and to achieve this it dismembering it, opens it, separating its parts, makes an account of them, describes them but when the task is accomplished it has just lost the bird, his flight, his color, his singing ...* Edgar Morin has built a conceptual device of enormous wealth to rethink the way of construction of knowledge by appealing to principles that seek to avoid the fate of "scientific" thinking. How to solve, then, *the supremacy of a fragmented knowledge among disciplines that often prevents operation of the link between the parts (always artificial) and the wholes?* How it is possible to *step into a world of learning that can grasp objects in their contexts, their complexities, their sets* ^{(4)?}

It is true that the academic structure develop, collects and transfers knowledge enshrined and legitimized through the incorporation of new perspectives when formulates the annual update of the curriculum and, occasionally, through the curriculum reforms made, but let's we agree that there are still issues that are dwindling if not excluded from the academic treatment. And they are, frequently, about sociocultural issues of enormous importance.

To understand fully what we mean when we speak of relevance, let me digress briefly. The *relevance* highlights the significance that a given set of knowledge has *to society*, on one side, and for the *scientific thought*, the conceptual debates and / or technological development, on the other. Relevance, then, involves two dimensions: the first must relate to the field of social practice, the problematic core faced by the society and whose approach involves the prospect of helping to improve the *substantive quality of human life* ⁽⁵⁾, the second, the scientific significance, relates to the field of knowledge ⁽⁶⁾, to the cognitive conflict resolution of the scientific-technology though, Some literature has identified the *importance of socially significant knowledge* ⁽⁷⁾, while other authors have devised the term *socially productive knowledge* ⁽⁸⁾. In any case, it is about to incorporate the concept of legitimacy ⁽⁹⁾ sociocultural, *epochal*, knowledge that hold-in an historical context- the truth value of what is preached by their scientist status. As noted, there is a significant distance between the two dimensions in which the importance of knowledge is seen, however, when analyzed in more detail, it can be find that social representations constitute the framework which sets the *recognition* of what in the field of knowledge, is constructed as *production* of meaning ⁽¹⁰⁾. In other words, social significance and scientific significance sustain one another, though they are not free of tensions and contradictions. From there, the complexity, but not the impossibility, to set if a particular knowledge and the expertise built on it, carries the value of relevance.

It can be said that there is no remote problems or outside issues, not even stable solutions and infinite human truths. That makes the communities fields of knowledge and doing fields being daily partialized and questioned. However, it is not enough that the knowledge produced, accumulated and distributed in the university fulfil the requirement of relevance. It is necessary that the University, through the performance of its graduates and their research, exercising a proactive impact on the installation of new debates and new perspectives of analysis to the society, in a way to contribute, effectively, to improving the substantive quality of human life.

So far, we have formulated the second challenge: how to design new organizational forms that will enable a more versatile approach to the universe, raising new problems and new questions, without losing the identity of the hard core of each academic group, of each one of the areas in which science is structured?

The setting that takes the university organization is designed on the basis of traditions that arise from professional practice preceding the academic organization, but also from the structure of disciplinary fields delineated on epistemological conceptions from long before the organization of the institution and that defined specific fields for each of the sciences.

Studies of professions, sociology of science, university political science work and even epistemology offer interesting categories for understanding the processes of creation, reproduction, reunion and Diaspora of *academic tribes* and territories. Chairs, departments, areas, careers, schools, colleges are the ways through which knowledge is organized and the respective groups of scholars, teachers, researchers, teachers, extension workers to develop their work and training of new intellectuals generations. It is verified in universities a type of organization that has been called *bottom heavy* and loose coupling, because the highest density of their substantive activity is true in the base (in the chairs, on the research equipment) that reunion in a possible random and circumstantial interacted way. This *sui generis* organicity makes it possible a relative versatility to make value judgments that form the basis of their scientific work.

But beyond the unique expertises and diversity conferred and of each of the degrees developed within it, the university is an unorthodox institution but that must act in pursuit of common good and growth its members and, crucially, of the whole society. Without losing the identity of the hard core of each of the careers and academic groups, it is necessary to have rules and procedures for academic management to ensure a more versatile organization to account for new problems and opens to the formulation of new questions. It is necessary, then, to find the organizational forms and procedures to preserve the independence of criteria embodied in academic freedom, to convene a more fluid and dynamic exchange between different academic structures to jointly address problems that have in common. In this regard, we propose the creation of core problems that become from the analysis of sociocultural events, natural or formal, to gather around them various academic administrative units (chairs, departments, centres or areas) as the institutional collective interests action-oriented union provide a synergy capable of producing changes that will contribute to and mediate an immediate improvement of living conditions of social groups that have dwindling opportunities for the empire of the inequities inherent socio-economic structure.

Historically, between research groups, lectures, areas, university departments, there are created networks that reunited academics from very different institutions from the country and abroad. The coordination with other university organizations is a perspective already present in inland areas and that is being promoted through various regional and international organizations. These links have led to national or international organizations that can project the institutional work. As an example, it is enough to recall the ALFA programmes or the workshops on the theme of the Montevideo Group. Transnationalization in the making and sharing of knowledge is not new, nevertheless, in the last twenty years there has been an increase in exchanges and shared workshops between academics from different universities. The management of academic mobility (teachers, researchers and students) requires new

organizational structures that facilitate this circulation and the subsequent accreditation of the efforts being made. This is so if it is considered that the Transnationalization of the problems that distress the daily life of near and distant communities, goes through the points of view, significant constructions and social practices of the people. Therefore, it is necessary and convenient to design organizational ways to facilitate international academic mobility, in our University and externally, with other universities in the country and the world. Our University High Council has approved the figure of Academic Degree Credit to encourage student work effort and ensure the administration of internal and external mobility in different curricular areas (which have been called elective and elective). This form, still little used, requires complementary rules to guide students in the opening prospects of their formation. It is worth mentioning that for the development of the project of creation of the Academic Degree Credit, the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) has been taken into account, in force in the European higher education from the Bologna Process, so that it could be equivalent with this system and with the hope that the Latin-American High Education adopts a similar system.

The new knowledge and new problems that challenge humanity require new formulations to face them with wit and celerity to form graduates who, in addition to their scientific and professional expertise, maintain their doing, thinking and saying with strong ethical principles through their critical and creative thoughts. A few years ago our university had incorporated the figure of the Research Program (Order No. /).

From this figure, we can imagine Academic Programs created around an interdisciplinary problem, which can be reached from different perspectives, and which has the relevance, belonging and scientific requirements and where to develop research, extension and teaching activities. It can also sustain courses and seminars that may be attended by students of many different careers to create innovative fields of knowledge. The association of teaching with research and extension multiplies each of the three substantive functions of the university.

The University and University students social responsibility involves the permanent and sustained review of their work, through self-evaluation processes and awareness of quality in order to complete, with excellence, their mission. This was a significant point of impact on university life at all times but which has highlighted with greatest impact in recent years. Let us pause at this point to discuss in some detail the origin of a fundamental aspect of the higher education law in force. I mean the institutional assessment problem. Between middle to late 60s, student movements and critical thinking at the time questioned the educational systems in general and universities in particular. Although this movement was observed in the West, predominantly, it should be noted that even in China, Japan, Korea and other Asian countries experienced similar arousals.

Not only on the Sorbonne walls, and in the *dazibao* of Chinese students, but also on the streets of Cordoba, Rosario, Tucumán, students and sociology and philosophy critical thinking put into question not only the institutional forms but also the content of university education. Later, in the early eighties, a devastating critique of educational systems and of universities in particular, was made, but this time from the neoconservative thought, with the conservative restoration that Reagan (11) and Thatcher in the conduct of U.S. and Britain and the Latin American dictatorships, they were unmistakable symbols of the era. If in the sixties was proclaimed that education was not a cost but an investment as a banner of the demand for increased budget in the eighties and nineties, economists of the Chicago School came to ask for the income of that investment. Human capital theory designed in the fifties was now returning for the earnings and the education was hacked.

In this context, the debate on higher education law in the mid-nineties refloated an idea that had been coined by liberal thinking in the first half of the twentieth century: to ensure university autonomy the situation should go back to the days before Avellaneda law; the State, now, claimed the power to establish knowledge for the professional exercise⁽¹²⁾. The original project of the executive branch, in 1993, included the figure of the State exam in order to issue certificates that entitled for the profession exercise. The quality problem was already a problem. In 1991, the First Conference on Quality and University was done in Salta. In 1992, the second Congress was done in Rosario. Also in 1992, in San Juan, the RCN debate the issue of academic quality and issued an agreement (number 50/92) in which he defines this elusive concept. And it says, *it is meant by quality, the positive effects that universities project in the media, through numerous activities which are impossible of being measure, but which allow a qualitative analysis, based on historical, socio-political and cultural processes in which they are formed. In this regard, the impact of the inclusion of the University and its impact on the media development must be consider, not only for the generation of undergraduate and postgraduate graduates (in quantity and quality) but also by the services it provided in the production, preservation, enhancement and dissemination of knowledge, summarized in a quality of life improvement. Therefore, it takes into account, all the activities inherent to the University and its assessment can not reduced the graduate as the only product and indicator of quality. The quality assessment, then, arises from an insight on the university internal growth processes, which values the changes in an ongoing confrontation with reality and the subjects intentions, who are constantly building and rebuilding their projects. Also, in the quality assessment the States investment and the superior results obtained from it should not be left aside.* In 1993, when the higher education law project was introduced, as being said, the rule has a chapter about the recognition of titles for professional practice in which what is known as a State Exam was installed, that is, the university academic degree was **unfolded** and the aspect referred to the professional qualification returned to the State. Remember that the Avellaneda's law had conferred this power to universities that, at that time were two: Buenos Aires and Cordoba ones. In 1994, in the city of Colón (Entre Ríos), the RCN debated -with the presence of representatives of the Ministry of Education- several points of the proposed law and the most controversial was this issue. Before the strong opposition of National Universities (and remember that the CRUP also opposed), the Secretary of University Policies responded with another figure, also in vogue in those years: the Evaluator State. The debate, instead of abating it became even more virulent. Finally, based on the conclusions of the congress on Quality and University, of CIN Plenary Agreement referred above (the n ° 50/92) and other institutional documents and literature on the subject, it was agreed that the assessment system and accreditation should be done through self-evaluation and academic peer review coordinated by a mix committee formed by representatives of the State and public and private universities. There, it can be said the "CONEAU", was born, in the city of Colon, Entre Rios. I am referring to Section 3 of Chapter 3 of Title IV of the Higher Education Law, known as Evaluation and accreditation.

The truth is that after almost two decades of those debates, today the university system has fully incorporated the concept of quality, evaluation and legitimation of his work through the procedures that each of the institutions and the system itself have established as part of the University life. Our University has conducted the self-assessment, it has met with external evaluation by peer reviewers, it has established nearly 90% of postgraduate programs and all the careers which entered through accreditation processes have proved their work.

The N° 551 bylaw that rules the establishment and curricula of undergraduate, included regular assessment of the curriculum every three years. We believe it is appropriate to

extend this rule in more detail about the criteria and procedures for the fulfilment of these assessments. The assessment refers to the enhancement of what is intended to assess. To enhancement means to explain the content and hierarchy that is assigned to each of the axiological categories that with what is evaluated is conceived. This is what the main problem in any evaluation is about. Therefore, we believe it is appropriate to established in a bylaw Ordinance the criteria and values that must be taken into account when evaluating the functioning careers curricula and those that may be proposed in the future.

The process of accreditation of undergraduate and graduate, indicate trends in the curricula design and in institutional practices, which is essential to put under analysis, as well as recovering as organizational experience, so that,- through critical and sustained over time review - to design new forms of curriculum design could be possible. The various processes of accreditation of undergraduate programs of the CONEAU analyzed the curriculum, its internal structure, its values, the time distribution of practical training and pre-professional practice, the articulation, the relevance, the more or the less flexibility, the completeness, among others aspects We should recall that the establishment of criteria, standards and guidelines is the result of a complex net that begins with the determination of which are the careers that are subject to accreditation, follows by the determination of standards,-which are proposed by the Colleges of all the Universities in the country, or in the case of regional accreditation by the Region ones- and culminates with the legitimization through the Councils of Chancellors and the Council of Universities. A cross-reading through each of these processes of accreditation, standards, comments, peer reviewers observations, to CONEAU's resolutions that they pass on the careers, allow to reveal criteria, trends and styles that then are incorporated like inherent of each one of the analyzed curricula. We have performed this task and today, we can synthesize these features to analyze them and understand them critically

We have developed the third **challenge: how to ensure the quality of institutional work through evaluation systems that ensure the excellence, the relevance and the importance of the graduates knowledge and formation?**

University education involves the assumption of a commitment that goes beyond the certification of a responsible performance of a profession. The diploma is a document that contains an ethical, intangible, implicit in the university being. The University commitment can only be with freedom, democracy, common good and human dignity. What ennobles the man is decent work, love and peace. This is the strong stake our university place through education, research and extension. We believe that social solidarity synthesizes contains and enhances those values at the same time that enhances the cultural heritage and scientific and cultural heritage of the University multiplying its extent by finding the institutional ways to facilitate and promote it. Solidarity Work must not be considered, in any way, as a remuneration of the effort that the society performs in supporting the university.

Solidarity Work is an ethical commitment to life. We want to clearly state our position on this issue because otherwise we settled on the problems of the weak measurement to try to determine how much the society contributes and how much the University retriuite with each of the actions it performed. Many of the economists who built the discourse and policies of the nineties, reasoned in this way, we do not adhere to reinstall this point of view. We understand that solidarity work must be inherent to the ethical training of students and, consequently, of graduates and that it is one of the ways through which it is possible to reinforce the conditions that sustain social life in the community.

We expressed, here, the fourth **challenge: How to build institutional spaces to transform the enormous potential of the actors in the University institutional life in direct benefit to improve the substantive quality of human life** ^{(13)?}

In the beginning, we refer to knowledge Transnationalization. It would seem almost obvious to add that the foreign languages reading comprehension knowledge is required to reach academic spaces in other countries. It is, widely, understood that English is the lingua franca of the international academic community. Moreover, as we said before, the world has become smaller, the MERCOSUR is already a cultural reality of the Americas. The incorporation of language skills in English and Portuguese and seems to be an obligation by the university to provide our students and our graduates a more complete formation. Allow me to make a brief explanation: We refer to language skills, not exhaustive vocabulary in those languages. There is not a speaker of any language who dominates an entire language vocabulary, not even of their mother tongue. I repeat, the idea is to build basic language skills, which, in principle, the reading comprehension.

On the other hand, I am interested in including in the debate some more topics. We live in a democracy, in an organized society with the legal system. Beyond the singular opinions that we could have on the respect of some particular norm, the legal system of the Nation is the frame of reference of our life, of our freedom, of our rights. It is necessary to know the law. Not, probably, all the laws in an exhaustive way. But, the National Constitution, the law that applies to the universities, the law of national education, our University Statute, the laws that regulate the professional practices of each one of the professions we teach cannot be absent of the process of formation of our students, of our graduates. We can debate about how much, when and in what way but the certain thing is that they cannot be absent.

Likewise, we understand that we must approach - in all the careers of degree curriculum- the singular way that the different cultures has to solve issues as regard life, the organization, the production, the education, the health, the housing, the security, the environment, etc. We are thinking about the need to incorporate compared perspectives with regions of the world that become more significant every day: Africa, Asia, the Moslem world, China, Latin America. It is not a question of new subjects, of new contents but to rethink what we teach today and to articulate it with other inviews, with new perspectives. Let's rethink our own view, let's do that the eye rebuilt the world. *The eye that you see, is not an eye because you see it, is an eye because it sees you*, was Antonio Machado saying.

Finally, we want to underline that the curriculum developments must support, beyond their differences, the most relevant aspects of an *institutional personality* that should imply the commitment with quality, the impulse of the social transformation through knowledge, the respect and the promotion of the human rights, the comprehension of diversity, the inspiration of deep social reforms, the supremacy of the collective values and the defense of the democracy in all the areas of social life. This it is our responsibility: to make and to think for a better life for all, women and men.

Bibliography:

- (1) BARÉS, E. (2009) *Calidad de la educación y formación por competencias*. En Revista de Pedagogía Crítica Paulo Freire. Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano. Santiago de Chile.
- (2) BECHER, T.; 2001 *Tribus y territorios académicos. La indagación intelectual y las culturas de las disciplinas*. Gedisa. Barcelona. Primera edición en inglés: 1989.
- (3) BRASLAVSKY, C., TEDESCO, J. C. y CARCIOFI, R. (1984) *El proyecto educativo autoritario*. FLACSO. Buenos Aires.
- (4) CULLEN, C. (1997) *Crítica de las razones de educar*. Paidós. Buenos Aires.
- (5) MORIN, E. (1999) *Los siete saberes necesarios para la educación del futuro*. Edición en español. Nueva Visión. 2001. Buenos Aires.
- (6) National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) *A Nation at Risk*. USA. Disponible en: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>
- (7) PUIGGRÓS, A. (2004) *La fábrica del conocimiento: los saberes socialmente productivos en América Latina*. Homo Sapiens. Rosario.
- (8) SANDER, B. (1990) *Educación, administración y calidad de vida*. Santillana. Buenos Aires.
- (9) VERÓN, E. (1993) *La semiosis social. Fragmentos de una teoría de la discursividad*. Gedisa. México.