

THE UNIVERSITY CHAPTER OF THE MASTER PLAN



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Federación Nacional de
Docentes Universitarios

THE UNIVERSITY CHAPTER OF THE MASTER PLAN: THE SIGNS OF A NEW PRIVITIZING AND COMMODIFYING REFORM EL CAPÍTULO UNIVERSITARIO DEL PLAN MAESTRO: LOS SIGNOS DE UNA NUEVA REFORMA PRIVATISTA Y MERCANTILIZADORA

At the outset of the current academic year, the national government announced the launch of a Bill for a National Education Transformation Plan to be sent to the National Congress. Since the announcement some months ago and even though the Plan has not yet reached either chamber of Congress, it has already raised an array of criticism amongst institutions, academic and legislative sectors linked to education and education-related unions. On a general note, objections have been raised on both the Plan drafting because of the manifold inconsistencies detected, such as, for instance, the conception of education therein represented, and on the direction of the changes proposed for the purpose of the formulation of the strategies and goals intended for the entire national education system. In addition, a recurrent claim has been that, according to what provided in the Plan, the incremental resource allocation mechanism enshrined on the Education Funding Act is to be revoked and the Teachers' National Collective Wage Bargaining process, already de-facto and illegally denied by the national government, is to be suppressed.

In addition to endorsing the foregoing criticisms of the Plan, CONADU also commits itself to disseminating such views of this Plan as specifically related to the university arena given that, even though it is still not known whether the Executive branch, as announced, is to actually turn this Plan into a legislative proposal, the Master Plan does not only contain signs of the direction intended by the Cambiemos alliance for the education sector policy, but also lies down certain proposals for programs

which are already implemented. As has been repeatedly pointed out during 2016, the process of public university system defunding should have warned us about the reforms to be promptly pushed, in a scenario that reproduces a strategy which, back in the 90s, led to the implementation of a series of programs eventually entailing major transformations for the Argentine university system. In a shrinking budget context, both institutions and individuals were forcibly compelled to adhere to programs which entailed substantial changes to the academic organization as well as significant strings to the direction of university activity.

Though ambiguous and inaccurate, the recently published “Plan Maestr@” (Master Plan) advances signs of the direction of the reform process the incumbent government is concocting for the university system. Alarming signals and conceptions which urge prompt decrying can be found in the plan contradictions, omissions, prioritized issues, as well as in the method employed for drafting what is to erect as a public policy.

Following is a review of some of the document’s considerations specifically focused on Higher Education priorities, actions and goals. This chapter is contained in a document which, throughout eight sections related to different educational system aspects or levels, enshrines some elements of a diagnosis intended to serve as the basis for a set of quantitative goals to define the action plan for the coming ten years. No in-depth analysis is to be made of each chapter contained in the Plan which, in its Higher Education section –according to title Y- and its related set of goals, displays the same general features as may be identified throughout the document: (a) a superficial diagnosis based on outdated and/or out-of-context data, with no reference to their sources, and packed with discrediting assumptions regarding public institutions’

activities; (b) reference to a system whose integral parts fail to be adequately identified, characterized and distinguished and a peculiar and remarkable equation between the public and the private system; (c) Inadequately justified priorities; (d) a list of goals not clearly related to the diagnostic considerations and therefore disputable assumptions about the suitability of the proposed initiatives to adequately respond to the pinpointed problems; (e) non-qualified introduction of categories whose sense conjures extensively disputed and controversial conceptual constructions, theoretical approaches and political perspectives, combined with institutional arrangements which fail to observe the currently effective system standards and practices. Their inclusion as public policy organizers entail structural transformations which, under the present conditions, are encouraged by circumventing a sufficiently informed debate amongst all of the system players and the citizenry.

Objections

- ✓ The Plan claims to aim to increased university students' "retention" (sic) and graduation rates, as well as an enhanced teaching "quality", with **no reference being made to teachers' working conditions**. No concern is raised about wages, professorship schemes, standardization of tenures or about the implementation of the provisions contained in the Collective Wage Bargaining, all of which stand as key conditions when it comes to enhancing education and upgrading the teaching activity.
- ✓ The term **"quality"** is recurrently used with no specification as to the sense this concept, widely debated in the education and academic arena, is being employed.
- ✓ The only indirect reference to an enhancement in university teaching "quality" which deals with the situation of faculty

members is the one bringing about the need to “hierarchize” the profession through postgraduate qualifications.

- ✓ The goal to expand the rates of university professors’ postgraduate qualification is put forward, whereas, on the other hand, PROFITE, the only program agreed upon in earlier CWBs for the support of practicing professors’ completion of postgraduate theses was discontinued during 2016 and 2017. As a result of university professors’ struggle, we managed to have the government’s commitment to restore the PROFITE program included in the latest collective bargaining agreement. Moreover, it is to be noted that the plan makes no reference whatsoever to how the promoted postgraduate qualification scheme would be funded. At this point, it should be reminded that in the 90s post-graduation observed a clearly commercial rationale and erected into one of the most dynamic paths towards the privatization of academic activity, and, in addition, gratuitousness fails to be ensured under the effective law.
- ✓ There is a close association between the notions of “quality”, “assessment”, “accreditation” and the mechanisms ensuring “transparency” through “accountability”, with no explanation as to the how **assessment mechanisms** are inserted into the effective sector policymaking processes. Claiming that assessment should provide adequate information to bootstrap improvement processes does not stand as sufficient definition of the relationship being justified because the areas and players prospectively involved in defining such improvements fail to be identified.
- ✓ Contrarily, concerning the **alleged “obscurity” and “lack of transparency” in public university management**, a blurry **“open government” notion** is used, with no explanation as to the its relationship with the co-governance bodies managing institutions

in accordance with the law and the reform-oriented tradition. The document seems to overlook the fact that public universities regularly account for the use of their resources, not only before their own collegiate government bodies but also before the SIGEN. [Sindicatura General de la Nación, the local Office of the Comptroller].

- ✓ On the other hand, the goals related to **student-support actions** presented are in direct opposition to what observed under the current management. The Plan points out the need to “carry on with” the scholarship policy for prioritized careers and to support scholarship programs aimed to low-income students, whereas in 2016 and 2017 all student-support programs have been trimmed. Likewise, the substantially curtailed number of PROGRESAR beneficiaries is highly impactful on low-income students’ opportunities to access to and continue in university education.
- ✓ The increase (or maintenance) of enrollment rates in public universities is not a highlighted target or a listed goal. If this condition is not met, the expected reduction in student failure rates and subsequent increase in graduation rates boils down to merely reducing and selecting the student population through different barriers to access. This is not only in breach of the currently effective legislation, but also counteracts the effects of the democratizing policies implemented over the previous years. **Remarkably enough, the document fails to acknowledge the existence of a right to higher education and the ensuing State responsibility to ensure it.**
- ✓ Emphasis is placed on the need to move towards a more effective **articulation at internal system level, as well as of the system with the productive sector and of the national system with other systems.** In this context, the failure to include any reference to pre-university institutions, which stand as a relevant dimension in

the university system “articulation” with the entire education system, is striking. “Articulation” is the key to respond to a series of diverse goals, only diffusely referred to on the document: (a) an enhanced graduation rate through student mobility, (b) enhanced quality through internationalization, as well as (c) the achievement of “relevance” and of a strengthened interweaving between higher education and the “productive system”. These purposes lead to a set of actions contained in the proposal for a National Academic Acknowledgement System (SNRA or Sistema Nacional de Reconocimiento Académico in Spanish) and the establishment of the Training Cycle Acknowledgement (RTF or Reconocimiento de Trayecto Formativo in Spanish) as measurement unit. Such articulation would require making curricula more flexible, shortening the theoretical career programs duration and tending to their homogenization at inter-institutional, regional and international level, establishing “quality assurance” parameters, fostering student mobility and adjusting academic offer to “human development requirements”. In this regard, it is to be noted that:

- The features of the SNRA fail to be sufficiently described on the published document. In turn, it has already started to be implemented on the basis of the agreements entered into by the national universities with the Office of Higher Education Policies (SPU or Secretaría de Políticas Universitarias).
- The mobility referred to on the goals listed, presumably based on the diagnosis of a deficient structure unable to prevent students’ movement along the national territory or amongst institutions or careers from increasing failure rates and also responsible for persistently low graduation rates, is limited to only lying down the intention to increase the number of actions tending to the internationalization of Argentine universities..

- The mere reference to a “comprehensive internationalization” notion fails to define a clear direction for the proposed policy.
 - The internationalization goal simply introduces training “homogenization” as a necessary condition for articulation and mobility.
 - Against this backdrop, “shortening theoretical career durations” are mentioned as necessary conditions. Rather than as a response to the concern about the real length of class attending and graduation times initially identified by an undetermined number of students (which, if anything, would require support actions to shorten the “real time”), they stand as an adjustment to the systemic features prevailing in other countries. No argument is raised to account for the fact that the existing barriers preventing students’ inter-institutional mobility (and the validation of subjects passed) currently erect as a pressing problem, or to evidence that this might be the best solution for it. Contrarily, there are numerous arguments against the benefits of shortening theoretical career durations.
 - It is to be noted that these proposals are in line with the recommendations made for the last two decades by the financial organizations which expect to influence educational policies in order to foster the conditions for the globalization of the education market.
- ✓ In light of the incumbent government’s economic policy, the goal of **intertwining knowledge generation and production with the productive sectors training** lies as a baffling assertion. Undoubtedly, the growth of the productive sector calls for qualified professionals as well as for the production of knowledge tending to strengthening the existing capabilities and fostering potential ones. Yet, no professional, academic or job skill training policy would be

able to counteract the effects of an economic program leading to the shattering of national industry and to the subjugation of economic variables to the hegemonic financial capital and to multinationals. In this scenario, qualifying university graduates on the basis of their link to the productive sector might stand as a hollow or even irresponsible statement which would only come to fueling the training of professionals with no real chances of inclusion in or linkage to an actually paralyzed or non-existent production sector.

- ✓ However, the influence of “productive sectors” in the very design of academic curricula encouraged in the Plan is certainly disquieting. In the first place, it is to be noted that, when it comes to “productive sectors”, it is key to clearly identifying those players whose intertwining with the academic activity is being promoted under such title, given that the goals guiding productive activities are widely dissimilar depending on the type of company: whether state-run, social economy or private ones. On the other hand, if having higher education training boiled down to qualifying professionals for the tasks deemed necessary by economic agents in light of their own strategies is to be avoided, and in the existing economic layout framework, institutional projects should not be subject to an intervention which conditions the independence academic activity requires. The link between universities and the productive sector should be framed by public policy guidelines intended to ensure that dependence on and subordination to business interests should not be the basis for such link. In absence of an adequate explanation on how this link is conceived in the policy enshrined in the Plan or of references to the funding sources to achieve the proposed goals, and in light of the direction of the CAMBIEMOS alliance government’s economic program, a

warning should be issued about the project bias and its prospective consequences.

- ✓ Moreover, there is an instrumentalist stamp in the proposal to strengthening the links between academic training and the productive sector. The role played by universities in democratizing knowledge, producing basic science, disseminating diverse discourses, synthesizing wisdom, turning out professionals with critical thinking skills, reflecting upon major national problems and debating state policies is overlooked.

Eventually, careful attention should be drawn to two issues which might be a sign of the spirit of this Plan and its undeclared goals. Firstly, **the articulation promoted as a key in the system reform makes no distinction between the public and private sector.** In light of the SNRA intended to be implemented, this may entail a transfer of financial, academic and symbolic resources from the public to the private sector, which in turn would stand as the hallmark of this new era of Argentina's higher education privatization.

Secondly, **the initial goal enshrined in the Plan argues that by 2026 it is expected that "100% of the authorized funding may be based upon measurable and assessable institutional development plans which may be in line with the national policy goals"**. To start with, it should be noted that universities themselves generally draft their institutional plans, which are subject to the debate and approval of the co-governance bodies. Yet, under the effective law, the approval of such plans or their "measurable" and "assessable" nature or even their alignment with the "national policy goals", unknown in terms of their content and conditions, is not mandatory. The fact that such plans may be a condition for the 100% funding is not only an anti-

democratic restriction on universities independence but, in an attempt to benefit the business sector in the design of development plans, also defines an inadequate efficiency-oriented criterion for the assessment of academic activity and additionally introduces the notion of subordinating institutions' activity to the market rationale.

To conclude, the absence of any reference to university professors' working conditions in the Plan Maestr@ is significant, as it represents a public policymaking methodology which excludes the sectors affected by such policy from its debate and design. If, on top of that, it is considered that the apparently most relevant proposal for the organization of this project, that is, the already implemented SNRA, the CAMBIEMOS administration is presenting to the those universities at the same time subordinated to its adjustment policy, for which there has been no chance of public debate about its implications or about the diagnosis serving as its basis or of discussing the best strategies to come up with solutions to the problems it is intended to resolve, the anti-democratic nature of this behavior is alarming. This process is found to contain a deliberate intention to promote and implement certain reforms whose consequences might entail structural impacts on the university system and which convey questionable conceptions about the role allocated to universities in the life of our nation.