

THE UNIVERSITY ENVISAGED BY CAMBIEMOS



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Federación Nacional de
Docentes Universitarios

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With a large attendance, including former Education minister Daniel Filmus, among other experts, the IEC-CONADU held a debate about the university chapter contained in the Master Plan, the document presented by the national government where an account of its educational lines of action are outlined.

Maybe there is no more conspicuous reference than one not made: inclusion, right to higher education, co-governance, gratuitousness, unrestricted access, guaranteed funding, regional integration, just to mention some, are all missing references in the Master Plan university chapter, the document presented by the national government last April where some of its ideas for the reform of the educational system are laid down. Hosted on July 6th at the premises of the “Centro Cultural de la Cooperación”, CONADU’s Studies and Training Institute (IEC) hosted the “Public Debate Forum in Defense of the Right to Education”, intended to interpret and debate the guidelines presented on the Master Plan to be implemented by the national government in the area of education.

Following the introductory remarks of IEC’s director, Yamile Socolovsky, there was a round of debate involving the participation of: Daniel Filmus (former Education minister and candidate to the Buenos Aires city Congress representative), Gabriela Diker (President of the General Sarmiento University), Mario Lozano (former president of the Quilmes University), Graciela Morgade (Dean of the University of Buenos Aires’ School of Philosophy and Literature), Laura Alonso (former under-secretary of Higher education policies and Unidad Ciudadana’s candidate to Buenos Aires province congress representative), Carlos De Feo (CONADU’s Secretary General), Blanca Osuna (former lawmaker and former mayor of the city of Paraná for the Frente para la Victoria-Justicialist party), Federico Montero (CONADU’s secretary of the organization department), Damián Del Valle (Coordinator of the Regional Platform for Higher Education Inclusion Policies, PRIU-IEC), Carolina Mera (director of the Gino Germani Research Institute), researchers Fernanda Saforcada and Laura Rovelli, as well as teachers, union and institutional representatives from the University of Buenos Aires, the University of La Plata, the “Arturo Jauretche” University of Arts, and from the Universities of La Matanza, General Sarmiento, Santiago del Estero, San Juan, La Rioja, Río Cuarto, Hurlingham and Lanús.

Ambiguous Planning

To a large extent, most participants agreed that the Master Plan is far from complying with the minimum rigour standards required for a planning project, let alone for one intended to become a draft bill. This is so to the extent that in the opinion of many, it is highly unlikely to survive long once Alejandro Finnochiario has been sworn in as Education minister in substitution of Esteban Bullrich.

As arose from Yamile Socolovsky introductory remarks, the diagnosis contained in the Plan is “superficial, and based on outdated and/or out-of-context data, with no reference to their sources, while also packed with discrediting assumptions regarding public institutions’ activities. Among other shortcomings, IEC director pointed out to the missing reference to key concepts (such as quality) or to the priority character of certain initiatives, while the goals, some being highly inaccurate, are not clearly concluded from the diagnosis and their monitoring mechanisms fail to be at all defined. And, in addition, measures in open violation of the effective law (such as the one asserting independence, both on the Constitution and on the Higher Education act)are proposed.

Yet, all attendees concurred that some of the guidelines behind the policy encouraged by the government for the educational sector are identified in the Plan. “We have found a peculiar summary of what might be considered a new counter-reform”, argued Socolovsky. “Given it is the governmental argumentation, we found ourselves in the need to challenge it”.

Law vs. Human Rights

“Nowhere in the Master Plan is any reference made to the right to education” – claimed Gabriela Diker during her presentation. There are references to human resource training rather than to education as a right, which is in opposition to the effective laws and to all the international principles our country has subscribed to”. On this particular issue, Daniel Filmus concurred that the entire Project is aligned with the so-called “market-oriented education” notion.

“The neoliberal Project –he explained- aims to shifting the management of universities away from the State. What is meant by “market-oriented education? It means there should not be over-education but education of people for the place they will take up in the market. If there is a 50% rate of unregistered employment, it means people will be educated for precarious employment. If they are over-educated, public funding is being squandered in human resources that will turn out to be useless.

That is why, pointed out Diker, “in the case of higher education, the right to it is replaced by the concept of equality of opportunities underpinned by an expanded scholarship scheme as only support tool.” Though over the latest year student-support schemes have been trimmed, which would come to oppose that goal, the President of the UNGS reminded that “the history of scholarship evolution shows that material support for education does not prove enough when it comes to ensuring the expansion of the right to higher education”.

“Meanwhile, -added Laura Alonso – throughout the territory the agendas of universities appear to go gradually invisible. I am worried about the thousands of young people who are losing access to higher education and I think we should render their situation visible. We are heading for the same scenario we witnessed during the 90s, when this was seen from an individual perspective and was boiled down to a bad lack issue, that is, “well, ok, I am not fit for this”. It seems to me that we should endeavor to prevent these situations from becoming naturalized.”

The Master Plan makes no reference whatsoever to the range of inclusive policies implemented over the latest years, including: health programs, residence halls, canteens, or

other initiatives that push the conception of university in intercultural terms and are mindful of gender equality and native peoples' issues.

"The treatment of the equality of opportunities issues in the Master Plan –further remarked Fernanda Saforcada- referred me directly to the former dictatorship government's Education Minister Llerena Amadeo actions summary document, which at some point highlights why it is relevant to refer to opportunities rather to equality. That quote is the key to figure out the political rationale behind this proposal". Even the notion of inclusion is reduced to the bare minimum in the Master Plan: "it only comes up in a special education section which is the same as to say that we are going 30 years backwards. In fact, this notion has not been considered for any education level, neither for the higher education one."

According to Mario Lozano, the changing perspective entails an eventual withdrawal on the side of the State: "Conceiving higher education as a human right and as a State responsibility carries along the duty of ensuring funding, quality, inclusion, relevance, that is, seeing all these dimensions as a State responsibility".

"This plan is by no means intended to expand higher education", summarized Diker, in line with the views of all participants. In turn, Damián Del Valle argued that: "The perspective matches that of the pre-reform higher education, that is, higher education for an elite. All the goals described are aimed to conceiving higher education on the basis of those already included in it rather than of those not yet included, let alone considering the society in general".

Higher education, the market and a conditional independence

Socolovsky pointed out two disquieting aspects, which, in her opinion, arise from the Plan: the persistence of a concept of articulation in a project where no distinction is made between the public and private sectors, which may result in the relocation of financial and symbolic resources from the former to the latter; and the decision that by 2026 100% of the budget should be tied to measurable development plans that should be in line with the governmental policy, that is, universities' investments would be subject to the Executive branch's approval, thus doing away with the concepts of independence and autarchy enshrined in the National Constitution.

"That would come to be the worst loss of independence to the hands of the Government – concluded Del Valle-. Yet, serious as that may already be, the worst loss of independence would be to the hands of the market. This is related to what was remarked earlier about the role of productive sectors, which rather than productive, are in fact the business sectors".

In Filmus' opinion, a new form of privatization looms ahead. "In light of the tradition in Argentina, it is not going to be a type of privatization involving the sale or transfer of public education segments to the private sector, but rather, a transfer of the management and marketing mechanisms to the field of education. That is what standardized tests aim to, meaning, from now on the purpose of the education provided will be passing those tests. Therefore success is not to be measured by how much a child learns but by whether they pass or fail those tests".

This conception is in complete contrast with that of a critical-thinking oriented university system, argued the former Minister, one which could be advocated for and further implemented, given that is the argument underpinning higher education elite- and privatization-oriented projects. “This is an aspect that should be thoroughly debated because even though major strides have been made, it remains to be seen if our universities are massively turning out critically thinking professionals who may be committed with our country. The theory of human capital claims that if we train professionals focused on setting up their own business and on making an income, that is, if the rate of return is merely individual, there is no reason why the entire society should pay for their training”.

In this sense, IEC’s director noted that nowhere in the higher education chapter is there a reference to the co-governance schemes including professors, students and graduates (in some cases also non-faculty staff) ensured by law and tradition. “As concerns the intimation about alleged unclarity or lack of transparency in public universities’ management, a blurry “open government” notion is presented, with no explanation of how this is linked to co-governance. The document seems to overlook the fact that 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]”.

It is almost exclusively in this framework that the concept of “quality”, superficially referred to on the document, is somewhat clarified. Socolovsky goes on to point out that in this point it is tied to the notions of “assessment” (based on different mechanisms), “accreditation”, “transparency”, “accountability”, which, in turn, might be associated to the discrediting campaign national universities are undergoing.

Diker remarked that no mention is made to how the coordination and planning pledged in the document will be implemented. The only currently existing coordination bodies referred to are the Regional Higher Education Planning Councils (CPRES in Spanish), “whereas two major scales are overlooked: the local one, on behalf of which universities plan and develop actions, and the national one”. The President of the UNGS announced that the National Inter-university Council (CIN or Consejo Interuniversitario in Spanish) is in the process of defining their standing in relation to the Plan they are to submit with the Universities’ Council (Consejo de Universidades in Spanish), which, according to the effective law, is the one that should be mandatorily enquired in case of changes in the sector.

Given that both public and private universities sit on the CPRES, in Graciela Morgade’s opinion, “this CPRES system articulation is actually masking an interest for a long-desired association between public and private universities which eventually ends up in private ones absorbing the population of public ones or viceversa”.

Credits and internationalization

Against this backdrop, as pointed out several of the attendees, the National Academic Acknowledgement System (Sistema Nacional de Reconocimiento Académico in Spanish) appears as the core of this Project, or at least the only part currently underway, and the key tool for bringing down to the real world one of the most recurrent and least clear concepts in the Plan: “articulation”.

The SNRA is the mechanism set up by the Office of Higher Education Policy last September, to Foster inter-institutional mobility on the basis of a series of agreements and a credit system. This means that students may take up a course of study at a certain university and complete it rather unencumbered at a different one, whether private or public, locally or abroad, given that the credits obtained may be transferred from one university to another. "Most national universities have entered into agreements to join this scheme with no public debate about it having been held", warned Socolovsky.

Through this mechanism, the Master Plan expects to solve the failure rates (blaming the alleged system rigidity rather social and economic factors or teaching conditions for the so-called "drop out"), to foster student international mobility (which, according to the plan, would enhance quality) and to arrange another form of "articulation", one involving the productive sectors (the Plan fails to clarify the incidence of business, the State or social economy, respectively, on this aspect).

One of the Plan's goals most elaborated on in the Plan is internationalization, where the SNRA plays a strategic goal. "Tripling the number of graduate and postgraduate students travelling abroad appears as a highlighted goal, - pointed out Saforcada. With Minister Barañao's background remarks claiming that the problem partly lied in researchers not leaving the country, dealing with increasing international mobility with no explanation of the prospective investment conditions for the scientific-technological system is tantamount to effectively encouraging brain drain or outflow, a major problem not only affecting Argentina but all of Latin America in terms of the transfer of resources to central countries in all senses".

Damián Del Valle pointed out another shortcoming in the treatment of internationalization: "Regional integration is a major missing issue. Conceiving internationalization as just student mobility means putting the focus on the world knowledge production centers, which would sound logical if we look at how the credit recognition system is designed.

In terms of internationalization, Daniel Filmus reported a more subtle intention. According to our National Education Act, Argentina is not allowed to enter into agreements which may tend to the commodification of education. Therefore, it is not allowed to join the move engineered by the World Trade Organization proposing that education may be considered just another service.

He went on to explain that "the goal of central countries is to find ways to make inroads into our markets to sell educational goods. Therefore, any university in the world may sell anything they may wish here. But those agreements also provide that no country shall be allowed to impose restrictions not applicable to the local service on the foreign one. Given that private education is subsidized in Argentina, the same subsidies should be granted to foreign services. As I see it, this is something to be emphasized and its consequences warned about, that is, the shattering of national universities which would find themselves competing with other universities and with any type of higher education scheme from around the world".

Devaluation of public higher education

All attendees were convinced that eventual goal is devaluating the public system. As pointed out by Morgade, “the composition of the scientific-technological system is unclear. This shows a poor conception of universities, because at the end of the day, what other role but that of conveying certain knowledge could there be for universities, that is, becoming that type of “enseñaderos” (knowledge instilling institutions) we have so many times criticized?”

As concerns teachers, it only focuses on the increase of professors’ postgraduation rates, with no references as to the funding or to the labor conditions as remarked by researcher Laura Rovelli: “there has been barely any debate over the proposal for such postgraduation training, with virtually no description of the professorship and tenure schemes or how these would be articulated with the teaching and academic careers contained in the Collective Bargain Agreement”.

In Filmus’ opinion, this impoverished public system is related to the type of society conceived by CAMBIEMOS: “A country for a highly qualified minority which, after the 90s, was educated in private universities, and a non-qualified majority, even though they make it to the higher education level.”

It was in light of this that CONADU’s Secretary of the Organization Department, Federico Montero made a call not only to the academic community but to society as a whole to take a position on the Master Plan. “Clarifying this in terms of the scope of Cambiemos’s higher education project and what our alternative option as a society would be is not only a need but our responsibility as University Teachers’ Federation. Along with this, we should devise a political program based on the idea of the right to higher education, one that may allow us to articulate different sectors: unions, the academia and political associations in order to underpin this idea. In other words, a plan for the university system development which may be turned into a congressional bill or into different political initiatives”.