

## **The Last Curricular Reform: An Unfinished Project**

*Juan J. Novara*

Facultad de Ciencias Económicas - Universidad Nacional de Córdoba

### **I. Short history of the process of reform**

. (1966) Starting on the idea of changing the "Plan of Study" for the 3 careers.

. (1997 - 1998) Diagnosis Stage.

A number of small workshops were devoted to the issue with participants of the main interested groups (actors). Teachers and Educators, Directors of Departments and Institutes of Research, members of association of students, with advice from experts in curriculum design and content. A pair of studies and reports were made on the structure of the actual Plan (almost 20 years old) and how it stands now in comparison with the Curricula of other national public universities (Cuyo, Comahue, Tucumán, Litoral, Rosario, also Buenos Aires (UBA) and Mar del Plata. A Survey on the opinion and reaction of students (specially those in 4° and 5° years courses), graduates at work, business people and firms as demanders of professional services, was conducted in 1998.

. (1998 -1999) Preparation Stage.

Designation of a special Committee for the Reform (4 members) to prepare a Draft of the Reform Project. /Res.3555, 27-4-99: Comisión Ejecutiva de la Reforma Curricular /. (Top down approach).

First Draft of the Reform Committee by an external member proposing a preliminary Plan for the career of "Licenciado en Economía" /August 1998/. (The plan was very similar to one of the most prestigious private university located in Buenos Aires: transplanting in a different environment is always risky).

Preliminary definition of general and specific objectives of the Reform and its main goals. (Objectives are too general or abstract to interpret them, in terms of proficiencies and skills for each career, identification of learning units that will integrate the course content and its configuration and partitioning into subjects). Over 9 goals proposed 6 were accepted and 3 were sent to the drawing board. /Res.4101, 8-11-99/. One goal, was the flexibility of the curricula by adopting the credit system at the whole university level. Another was that "Epistemology and Methodology of Research" was a required course for all careers, as well as "Ethics". More requirements on foreign languages will be added - in accordance with rules to be established by the University. Emphasis was given to achieve a better preparation in "Informatics": technical and management skills. Frequent revision of the Plan should be implemented.

Defining and approving profiles for each career (a long list of things that graduates should be able or prepared to do it at the end of their respective new plan of study), we will make specific comments on this issue. Anexo Res.4134, 13-12-1999.

. (2000-2001) Discussion Stage

Academic group discussion by Departments and small groups of professors. New meetings with authorities and representatives in the Directive Council of the Faculty (DC). Rewritten draft of the project with separate proposal (not yet unified) for each career.

. (2002) Stalemate

The last document of the Plan, as it stands, awaits for treatment by the DC. There are no signs of final agreement and minimum consensus (different visions, interests and perspectives of members of the academic community, between and intra careers, of students representatives and graduates, makes it difficult to expect a positive advance in the next months).

## **II. Importance of Economics as a career: in terms of students, resources and results**

In terms of the numbers of students is the third one, but the first in resources applied to teaching and research (i.e.: students to teacher ratio) and also in academic performance.

In the total number of students going around, there may be more than 1,500 registered but not active. The share of Economics has been increasing in the last 10 years, but clearly is less than 6%, in year 2002, with more than 68% for accountants and almost 26% for Business Administration. New entrants of years 2001 and 2002 shows a decrease in the accountants share, and increase somehow erratic in Business Administration and an increase in Economics to 8.8% in the actual year. At the same time we have a high number of re entrants (1,800 in 2002) that were mostly dropouts of the year before, a clear sign of one of the main characteristics of the public university education in Argentina. At the other end (reaching 5° year) we have a population of approximately 1800 students that are assumed to be in the last year of their career (by subjects approved: 30, 30, 29) with a clear dominance of accountants (79.5%) and with only 3.1% of economist. You can also see the number and distribution of graduates in the last two years, the average degrees and average duration of each career with the economist showing better performance. /Influence of work/non work it is important to acknowledge here, as well as, other non controlled factors/.

## **III. Dropouts, attrition rates and low percentage of graduates per class**

To see the influence of dropouts and attrition rates we will follow the whereabouts of the class of 1997. (The data is for the 3 careers with no distinction

between them). At the end of the first year we have lost 25% of the initial population. At the end of the second year another 12.4 % are leaving. Then another 5.4% and 3.1% in the following two years by the beginning of the year 2001, only 1,491 are staying. The status of these students in terms of subjects approved -by December 2001- shows that only 172 (11.5%) are considered in regular schedule (or normal expected time), another 344 (23.1%) are one year or more behind schedule (having approved between 22 and 29 subjects). 334 (22.4%) are in third year or less (16 to 22 subjects approved) and 641 (43.0%) have not completed second year requirements and can be considered almost lost for ever. An optimistic estimation of the number of graduates to be expected from this class will be less than 850, or roughly 30% of the initial class (of 2,772).

In terms of total value added of education, the public university system is not doing a good job, impairing or destroying the potential of more than two third of the registered students. It is not enough to have some very good students and one or two brilliant stars per year. In terms of local prestige it may be important, but not from the social point of view (cost and benefits).

But if resources are not tied to enrollments to some degree, there is no incentive for academic units to care about students. Putting pressure in the first years is a way to decrease the load of massive courses. Passive learning environments that predominate do not engage students. On the other side of the coin if students know that there is no restriction or punishment to failures (monetary or otherwise) they will not have incentives to study hard, although opportunity and family costs will be increased.

#### **IV. Other Problems and Failures**

In a separate note we have identified ten failures or problems that should be corrected and solved with the new Plan. Some of them were identified by the previous description (i.e.: High rates of dropouts and then re-entrants, excessive time of permanence, no restriction to keep a minimum average grades or number of subjects approved by year, low graduation rates and high level of waste of resources, money and time).

More important or critical are the non-integrated views of education from secondary education to first degree at the University and then to cover the difficult steps to Masters and Doctorates in the same national university system. An integrated view of the process should prevail, instead of isolated efforts. This approach requires fundamental changes in organization, resource assignments, use of time, entrance requirements, minimum performance and reassignment of the teaching staff, making rooms for our young graduates with Master and Ph.D., or doctorate degrees obtained abroad.

Although the problems of secondary education should be corrected at that level, the University (Faculty of Economics) can not ignore the problem and do something different to help students to close the gap. The so-called "Ciclo de Nivelación" or initials leveling courses are not enough. Requiring some kind of

uniform national test of entrance (like SAT), and teach remedial courses of different kinds, giving more information of what they will find at the University door, can help to limit the high rate of dropouts in the first years.

The long duration of the career can be cut by decreasing the years of common courses to one year instead of two. Increasing the low level of intensity of the educative effort will be another measure. There are only 26 to 27 weeks of effective classes by year. Too much time is assigned to exams (February, March, June, July, September, November, December, etc.), vacations and class suspension with no good reasons.

The model of learning is "something of the past". Many students make only the minimum effort required to acquire the right to have an exam, and repeat it as many times as he/she can until it is approved. There are no tutors at any time in the career that can help students to overcome some difficulties of learning or planning their career. Fixed questions multiple-choice exams do not help student to think, nor be able to work, analyze and solve real problems. Oral and writing expression, are skills not taught at the University level, notwithstanding that some professor give them "essays" and written assignments or to write short term papers and defend them orally. "Learning to write should be a first step of writing to learn".

While academic abilities can be obtained through formal education (cognitive skills), generic skills (problem solving, work on groups and under pressure, good oral and written communications, interpersonal relations) will require special attention to the way the program is organized and the adequacy of the teaching staff. To make room for new topics one need to scrap others, and in the process you can expect some resistance to change.

The question of designing new curricula with enough flexibility for each career, allowing for a more easy transition at the entrance and the end toward a Master or Doctorate career is not an easy task. The issuance of an intermediate certificate after the third year (a really bad solution required by the University for those people that will not complete their studies or has to leave them by other reasons) is an additional burden, but not an important reason or cause for the stalemate. Since time is overdue.