

HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY IN THE 2002-2006 EDUCATION REVOLUTION

The role for Cooperation

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION OF COLOMBIA

Colombia has made great efforts and obtained important advances in education during the last few decades. In spite of this, it is still far from offering a quality education to all of its youth population. The *Education Revolution 2002-2006* created by President Uribe seeks to address the necessities of coverage and quality that the country requires to achieve better conditions of social and economic development, and to improve the quality of life of the population. In order to fulfill this objective, the Education Development Action Plan has defined three main educative policies:

- 1. Extending educative Coverage*
- 2. Improving the quality of the education*
- 3. Improving efficiency of the educative sector*

These three policies are oriented towards facilitating access to the educative service in every region of the country; to assure the permanence of the students in the system throughout the totality of the educative cycle; to improve their learning processes in such a way that they can develop the necessary capacities to contribute to the construction of a better country, and to face the exigencies of the contemporary world.

In order to fulfill the objectives of these three policies, the Ministry of Education has formulated 40 strategic projects, of which 16 belong to Higher Education. This paper is a summary of the projects that are being developed currently. Those in which the Ministry of Education is receiving some type of international cooperation

are described in detail, as well as those in which there are potential opportunities for cooperation.

At the present time the main component of international cooperation in the Vice-Ministry of Higher Education is through credits of the multilateral banking system. It is important, however, to find new ways of interacting with the international community through approaches that take into account the country's weaknesses in terms of economic and technological resources, but without ignoring its ability to participate in collaborative actions.

1. POLICY OF EXTENSION OF COVERAGE

In spite of its increase in the last 10 years, the level of coverage of higher education in the country is still below the international levels and those of many countries of Latin America. Between 2002 and 2004, the rate of coverage went from the 20.6 to 22.6 % , an increase of 105,000 in the total matriculation.

The goal for increased matriculation for the period 2002-2006 is of 400.000. This is to be obtained through the following strategies:

- 1.1 Granting credit to students of low resources for the access to quality programs:** This project seeks to consolidate system of credit to finance the academic fees for the students of postsecondary level. Priority is given to low income students and allows for the involvement of higher education institutions in the administration of the resources and the support of the beneficiaries. External credit resources from the World Bank, of US \$ 200'000.000 and a national contribution of US \$ 50'000.000 are available for the promotion of fairness in the access to higher education in technical, technological, and professional studies. These resources also aim to support doctorate formation.

1.2 Management and Performance Action Plans: this project seeks to modernize the private and public higher education institutions through an agreement for the efficient use of resources and the improvement of the academic management.

1.3 Strategies directed at the diminution of desertion: The project's goal is to accompany Higher Education Institutions in the design and implementation of programs that decrease desertion, which at the present time is about 5%. This will be obtained through the installation in each of the institutions of a technological tool that will capture and consolidate information that helps in the follow-up of the problem. This project is being financed with resources from the national budget, nevertheless, it is necessary to have non-reimbursable resources for the retention of students in the system. Some aspects of desertion are key including, increased flexibility of academic programs, economic support for the students, construction of students profiles, and professional orientation. International technical cooperation is also required in order to learn about significant experiences that higher education institutions of other countries have implemented. The financing of studies to understand the dynamics of this major problem in Colombia's education system is fundamental.

1.4 Use of new technologies and methodologies: The incorporation of information technologies in Colombian higher education allows for the modernization of academic development processes, extension of coverage through the diversification of the supply, access to regions with poor development opportunities, and democratization of knowledge. The Ministry is working on the following activities:

- Construction, design, and maintenance of a Bank of Virtual Objects in the Portal *Colombia Aprende* that aims to contribute to the design and development of academic programs with high standards of quality.
- Socialization of the use of new methodologies and technologies through the provision of contents and educative services on the Internet directed at teachers, researchers, students, families, and the community in general.
- Training tutors to use virtual technology in the classroom, creating academic contents, and supporting learning networks that unite higher education Institutions through the interchange of knowledge and research.
- Creation of a High Speed Network to integrate regional networks and support the national university network.

The Ministry of Education finds in this project a great opportunity for the reception of technical cooperation from countries that have advanced technological resources. The production of contents is an arduous and expensive task. The necessary investment is high since the expenses in property rights, the technological infrastructure for the edition, and the processes for cataloguing, qualification, and adjustment of the publication are very high.

Within this context, technical cooperation appears to be a strategy to guarantee the design and implementation of new technologies to guarantee the extension of coverage with quality. This cooperation will also allow for the availability of scientific and technological knowledge in higher education.

Cooperation must be oriented toward the transference of knowledge, contents, and experiences in the articulation of information within higher education institutions using information technologies. More precise

cooperation in terms of donation of equipments and the training of tutors would be the most effective way to reproduce and sustain a policy for the incorporation of information technologies.

1.5 Community Centers of Higher Education- CCES:

Their objective is the extension of coverage in underprivileged populations of the country through the supply of pertinent programs according to the productive vocation of the regions in which they are installed. The use of new technologies like remote and virtual programs is an essential component of the project.

These Centers are conceived as alliances between the Government, civil society, and academia, with a common objective: to generate opportunities for social and economic development to underprivileged communities. The national government acts as promoter and facilitator, and contributes resources; the local governments and the representatives of the civil society and the productive sector communicate the realities of the community in terms of the needs for productive projects; academia makes its knowledge available for the region's development.

The strategic areas in which the Ministry of Education could use international cooperation, more specifically technical cooperation, can be summarized in the following:

- Support in the use of New Technologies: ensuring connectivity in geographically underprivileged zones and strengthening communication technologies in the CCES.
- Consolidation of Strategic Alliances: requiring greater technical assistance and training that allows for the consolidation of regional alliances. In Colombia, the experience in this field is still young, thus best practices in other countries must be learned.

- **Project Formulation and Strategic Planning:** it would be ideal to count on technical assistance and to learn about successful experiences that could be adapted to CCES.
- **Efficiency and Transparency in the use of Resources:** non-reimbursable financial resources could contribute to the sustainability of the Centers.

1.6 Promotion of Technical and Technological training:

In order to attain greater levels of development, Colombia requires mechanisms to establish greater correspondence between the education system and the labor market. It is also important to extend the qualified supply of technicians and technologists who specialize in those fields most demanded in the country in accordance with its innovation processes. In addition to that, higher education coverage is low: 24%. While 78% of the students attend university, only 8% attend technical programs and 14% technology programs. Traditionally, the programs of technical and technological formation have been academically defined, and not derived from the necessities of society and the production sector.

The objective of this Project is to expand the quality and pertinence of technical and technological education. This will demand great coordination between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Protection, the local administrations, the groups of political interest, the educational institutions, and the production sector.

The Ministry expects to increase technical and technological education from 22% to 30%, to augment the number of qualified professors in these fields, and to advance the accreditation of high quality programs.

Technical cooperation would be a fundamental tool for the consolidation of this Project in two aspects:

- Consolidation of Alliances: an international partner as part of the alliance through the contribution of resources could favor the success of this project.
- High Development Technological Centers: scientific and technological cooperation to strengthen is needed, since they are conceived as main actors in the regional alliances.

2. POLICY FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

The low levels of quality and the lack of research within higher education institutions are main preoccupations of the present government. These aspects are indispensable for the improvement of competitiveness in the country.

In this sense the Ministry of Education has worked actively in strengthening the System of Higher Education Quality Assurance, aimed at providing public guarantee of a high level in all the higher education programs offered in Colombia.

The System counts on several components:

2.1 The verification of minimum conditions of quality that must be fulfilled by all higher education programs

2.2 Voluntary accreditation of high quality standards of programs and Institutions. Through these processes the State makes a public recognition of their excellence.

2.3 Examinations of higher education quality “ECAES” evaluate the students at the end of their undergraduate program in all areas of study.

2.4 The Observatory of the Labor Market is developed within a policy for the improvement of planning, management, and evaluation mechanisms. It will offer

information about the attainment of employment on the part of the graduates, its quality and salaries, and the answer to the demand of the market. Its design and assembly seeks to implement an information system that follows graduate throughout their careers and the demand on the part of the national and international productive sector of qualified human resource.

The Observatory of the Labor Market will be a fundamental source of information and analysis for higher education institutions regarding pertinence and quality.

The World Bank is co-financing the first stage of the Observatory. However, in the second phase, which will provide qualitative information about the graduates, bi-national technical cooperation would be beneficial for understanding other information systems implemented with success abroad.

Other projects that seek to promote the quality of higher education are:

2.5 The creation of the Monitoring System for the supervision and control of higher education.

2.6 Internationalization of Higher Education: This project seeks to consolidate a policy that facilitates the insertion of the Colombian higher education in the international context, generating adequate conditions for academic mobility. Its activities can be summarized as follows:

- *Promotion and support to export services of the Higher Education Institutions:* The growing participation of the education Institutions in the market of services world-wide has generated a change in the mindset in the academic sector in Colombia. Foreseeing the possibilities that exist for exporting education, the Ministry of Education will initiate a training process on internationalization strategies directed at the International Relations Offices of the Institutions. At the moment, within the framework of the

negotiation of a Free Trade Agreement between Colombia and the United States, the education sector is exploring the possibilities of entering the American market through the establishment of institutions in their territory, the supply of virtual programs, attracting American students, and the participation of Colombian professors in their Institutions.

- *Promotion of bilingualism:* bilingualism will be included as a criterion for the accreditation of programs in Colombia and will be evaluated in the examinations taken by the students when finalizing their bachelors education. Virtual objects introduced in the Portal Colombia Aprende, will also help the community with leaning tools.
- *Subscription of agreements for bi-national research projects:* the Ministry seeks to subscribe agreements with several countries for the joint financing of University research groups.

The process of internationalization of the education is generally characterized by the collaborative actions between Governments, accrediting agencies and Higher Education Institutions. Nevertheless, technical cooperation to fortify accreditation processes and to comprehend functioning and operation of foreign systems, especially those related to the requirements and barriers for the export of services, can be extremely useful.

The ties between state organizations and Education Institutions of different countries are fundamental for the exchange of students, professors, and researchers. Joint financing mechanisms are generally used for the mobility of people within countries. Internships and working exchanges are some of the most important collaborative modalities in which Colombia wants to focus its efforts.

3. POLICY OF IMPROVEMENT OF THE EFFICIENCY IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

The higher education system has throughout the years presented problems related to multiplicity of entities and poor coordination between them. The Ministry of Education is working towards the modernization of its institutional structures, their operational procedures, and their systems of incentives and supervision.

The main reforms and projects of this policy are:

3.1 The creation of the Vice-ministry of Higher Education as the Director in charge of developing the tasks related to promotion, inspection, and monitoring of this educative level. These tasks were completed by ICFES, the entity that in the present is exclusively in charge of the development of the National Testing System.

3.2 Strengthening of the National Higher Education Information System: the System seeks to offer reliable statistics and to conform a system of indicators that allows for decision making on the part of the community. The Ministry aims at implementing a new conceptual and technological definition for the current operating system. The new System will be able to connect higher education institutions with the main agencies of the education sector and homogenize the consolidated captured information.

3.3 Design and implementation of a referencing system: this system will allow for the application of management evaluation indicators, the distribution of national contributions and the generation of stimuli in higher education. This project aims at the implementation of a benchmarking system for higher education institutions, in order to make improvements in the policies and strategies, through the identification, adaptation of processes and best practices. This system will allow for the comparison among institutions, the implementation of new forms of management, and

the identification of leaders within the framework of the system's parameters.

A bank of better practices is part of this system, as well as the implementation of a Unique Accounting Plan to homogenize the financial information of the institutions, and the construction of a system of indicators that allows to monitor their performance. This project is financed with resources of the Nation.

3.4 Providing technical assistance to departmental, district and municipal Secretariats of Education, to deepen decentralization processes and fortification of the local management.

Given the fiscal situation of the country, its low capacity of indebtedness, and the great necessities of the sector, the credit of the World Bank that the Ministry relies on is very convenient as it allows for short term resources at a reasonable cost. However, there is an urgency to have access to technical cooperation and non-reimbursable resources for financing projects that aim at the extension of coverage, the improvement of quality and efficiency of the sector.

Some of the projects developed at the Ministry of Education have received support on the part of international actors, mainly through financial arrangements. Although necessary, we aim at consolidating an international cooperative scheme in which we can contribute in a reciprocal manner.

The System of Higher Education Quality Assurance that we have constructed counts on great recognition all over Latin America and is an example of the knowledge and experience we can share with other countries in the region through exchange of experts and information. Several other projects are innovative and could be of interest to other countries in a similar stage of development.

Donor requirements in general ignore the particularities of the recipient countries. Approaches that take into account local visions are more realistic and accepted by the beneficiaries. Some of the cooperation modalities the Ministry of Education could profit from are: training; exchange of experts in relevant fields; exchange of information, cooperation in joint research projects; documentation and materials; the financing of studies and diagnose missions; consulting services; the financing of seminars and joint projects; the conformation of international thematic nets; technical assistance in the fields of technology; among others.

The Ministry's views on international cooperation have been the result of the successful implementation of particular projects that imply the active participation of all of the actors involved.

A good example of this cooperative scheme is the ECOSNORD Agreement between Colombia and France. This program seeks to promote the development of mutual interest research projects and to generate scientific and technological cooperation between research and higher education institutions of both countries, through missions and internships. The program is focused on doctoral and postdoctoral levels

Both Parts support the program. The missions, in which junior and senior researchers mobilize in both senses are covered by the origin country in regards to transportation costs towards the host country; and by the latter in regards to stay expenses of the invited researcher.

The higher education internationalization policy of the Ministry of Education can be summarized as follows:

- 1. Opening the education sector to greater international exchange is favorable for the development of the country. The extension of educative supply can be translated into better possibilities of access on the part of the students, greater interchange of innovating knowledge, transference of technology and research.*
- 2. Colombian Higher Education Institutions have the autonomy to decide on that related to the subscription of international cooperation agreements with academic institutions or organizations. However, the task of the Ministry is to provide optimum conditions that facilitate international relations through:*
 - A convenient legal frame that allows the provision of education services in any mode of supply (virtual, foreign institutions established in the country, etc.)*

- *The subscription of international agreements between the Ministry and other governments or international organizations to facilitate cooperation schemes for academic exchange, degree recognition, joint research, training and technical assistance.*
- *Providing training and conveying information to Higher Education Institutions about internationalization trends.*

This policy reflects the intentions of the Ministry of Education in the sense that cooperation schemes built by different actors of the academic sector, should leave behind possible paternalistic practices that do not promote equal participation.
