

*University improvement
in the developing countries: a major challenge*

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I. A changing scene

Globalization has meant a series of very important changes for society on all fronts, and consequently for the higher education systems as well. There are a number of clear trends at the present time:

- a. First, a global perspective of educational development focused on **international quality criteria**. This involves an increasing concern for the academic excellence and, therefore, on evaluation and accreditation processes.
- b. This concern for quality goes together with the emergence of **new actors** in the educational scene, particularly in higher education. Latin America is experiencing the proliferation of institutions—mostly private institutions—without these countries having simultaneously developed an effective quality-control system to ensure that criteria for academic excellence is satisfied.
- c. This proliferation is the result of the increasing demand that has been a key element in the **expansion process of higher education**, in the last decades.
- d. Unfortunately, this increasing demand has not been accompanied by an economic support. On the contrary, in many developing countries, the fiscal crisis has caused the reduction of social investment and consequently, the **decline of financial support for universities**.
- e. There begins a struggle between the increasing demands for access and quality, on one hand, and the decline of conditions to assist with excellence a number of students, on the other hand. This situation expands **the gap between the universities from industrialized countries and the higher education institutions from the developing countries**. Nevertheless, this gap is faced by high-quality core groups by promoting creative strategies to keep reasonable conditions for the development of their scientific, educational and cultural tasks. In this context, our universities may experience difficulties to attract high-level scientists.
- f. In this new period, universities are distinguished by **the internationalization of quality criteria, expectations, proposals and challenges**. The international factor receives more attention and encourages changes in the curricular, educational and research fields.
- g. Under these circumstances, higher education institutions deal with **increasing pressures to obtain external resources** that would help to cover the high costs for research and outreach projects, and technological updating.

- h. In addition to that situation, there is a need to **increase our ties with the production sectors**, both for social relevance and for obtaining outside financial support. In various regions this is an innovative practice for which neither governmental and private sectors nor the academic institutions are sufficiently prepared. This causes a gap with negative consequences for university development as well as for society.
- i. The promotion of new information and communication technologies influences the academic performance and the university administration. One of the areas in which the impact is higher is in the construction of innovative pedagogical models. This is a transformation that comes together with an entire structure of changing expectations from young generations, regarding universities.
- j. Public universities, in particular, need to address increasing concerns. The new global development system seems to favor a perspective in which knowledge is just a commercial product. This encourages the action of universities to reestablish the concept of education as a social asset, and therefore, the need to democratize the access to the knowledge of relevance and excellence.

II. Public universities: key elements in the developing countries

It is undeniable the role that the Latin American public universities have played in the creation of new opportunities for social advance and for the independent analysis of the national problems and the international concerns. Although, in some periods and regions, universities were affected by specific political situations, the restitution of their quality and self-governing academic work has been essential to reinforce democracy.

This vital activity of public universities has been improved in this age of knowledge. Since science and innovation are critical factors of economic development and the formation of more specialized human resources is an imperative factor for welfare and for the competitiveness of countries, the social role of universities has become the focal point.

This is very significant, particularly in Latin America. Society brings to the attention of universities increasing needs, in a time when the political independence, the commitment to welfare and the long term vision of these institutions seem to explain the credibility they inspire in people.

Universities are generally introduced as learning institutions that protect our heritage and guarantee a sustainable investment. It is, precisely, that **sustainability related to learning, to social**

commitments, to the conservation of heritage and to the definition of policies—typical of university processes— what becomes the stimulus for higher education institutions to see themselves as organizations with the privilege to assume strategic development tasks in their countries and regions. In most of the cases, universities are able to overcome the instability of their country's political context, reaffirming positions, definitions, actions and processes in the middle term.

Therefore, the support to education and training, research and outreach processes, implemented by the universities in the developing countries shall become, from our point of view, a priority for the international cooperation systems.

Development cooperation through universities: a privileged way to deal with global challenges

Once the mission and the special role of higher education in developing countries are clear, it is necessary to understand some other aspects.

A changing university, as well.

To perform the social action described before—with quality, independence, authenticity, and a middle term perspective—universities shall be well-disposed to undertake a self-transformation process without renouncing to the principles that have distinguished their work for years. The traditional practices are insufficient to face the new challenges. Therefore, the international support plays a decisive role in this process of change.

Let me present the specific case of Universidad Nacional to uphold these affirmations.

III. Creation of the Middle Term Institutional Global Plan (2004—2011) at Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica.

Strategic planning and policy reform: a far-reaching step.

For many years, Universidad Nacional developed its activities, basically, through annual institutional plans and ad hoc policies that provided results at the long term. Recent reflections, considering the current trends of higher education systems and the self-institutional experience, made Universidad Nacional to place **institutional transformation** as a strategic objective.

However, it was necessary to connect, bring together, and align the many institutional efforts conducive to the change, to prepare a systematic proposal that would ensure, at the same time, their mutual support.

Some of the ongoing transformation processes are the following:

- **Regionalization** policy, with new educational opportunities, programs and infrastructure.
- **Reform of policies** related to outreach, research and teaching projects.
- Promotion of strategic **interdisciplinary programs**.
- Reform of **policies related to attraction of students, curriculum and admission**.
- Improvement of the University's Student Scholarship System.
- New policies related to **multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary work**.
- Process of **reform for the administration of services**, in which **deconcentration** is a central point.
- Realignment of budget to seek a better balance between the operating and labor items, to improve the **strategic investment**.
- Improvement and reconditioning of the physical infrastructure, and technological updating.

In this context, the design of a Middle Term Global Plan became a primary effort for the institution. We were concentrated on both, the process and the product.

PROCESS

The process included various perspectives:

PROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS: it helps to imagine the future by understanding the changes, trends and challenges of the environment. In addition, future may be visualized based on the capabilities and aspirations of the university students, and consequently, to achieve the commitment of an improved university.

STRATEGIC ADMINISTRATION: it allows examining the aspirations with a sense of reality, comparing them with the existing and expected internal and external obstacles. At the same time, the institutional skills required for reaching those aspirations may be visualized.

PARTICIPATIVE PLANNING: it focuses, particularly, on the qualitative aspect. It highly appreciates the contributions of the university community, including the historic experiences of participants and information they have accumulated.

PRODUCT:

The Plan's creation process means learning, mutual recognition, strengthening of the identity and commitment to improvement; the product is as much ambitious as the process that leads to the plan.

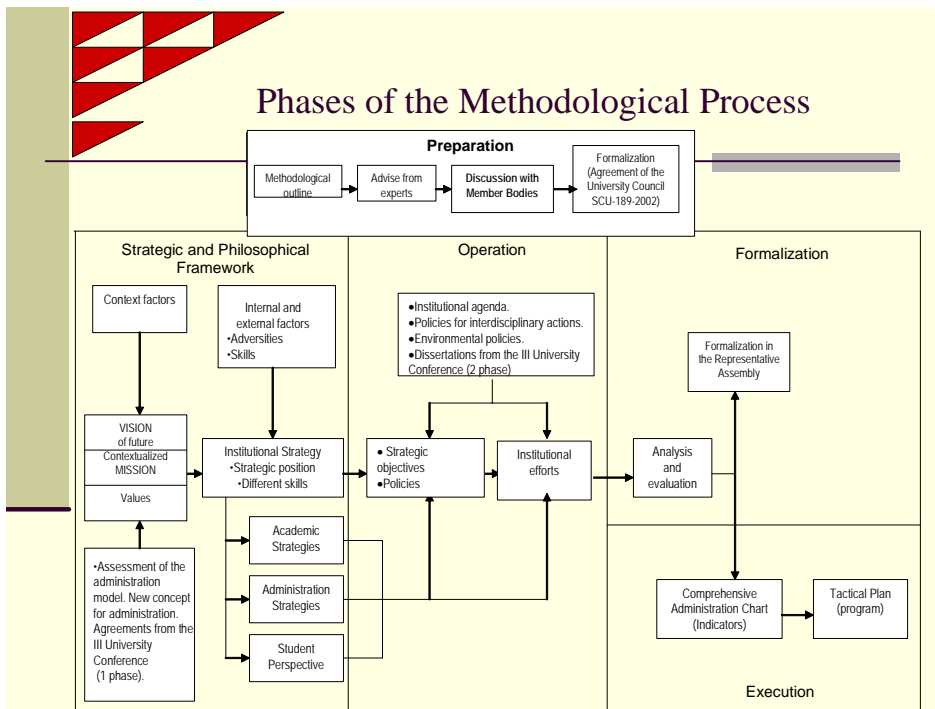
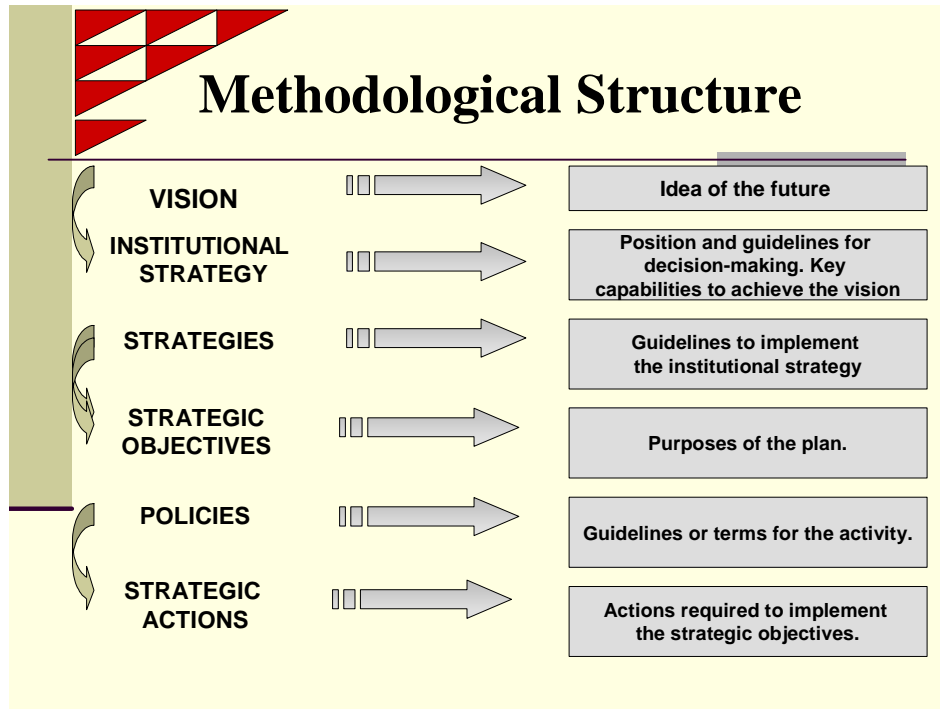
The Plan's document states the following:

“The Middle Term Institutional Global Plan establishes the development vision of Universidad Nacional for the next ten years. It spells out the institutional strategy and defines the strategic objectives, the policies that should be followed and the efforts that shall make possible the achievement of these objectives. It is a comprehensive plan to guide the academic development and the institutional activity.”

The product includes the following aspects:

1. Introduction.
2. Methodological Guidelines.
3. Analysis of the Internal and External Situations.
4. Philosophical Framework (mission, principles and values).
5. Strategies (institutional strategy and strategic fields of knowledge).
6. Objectives, Policies and Efforts.
7. Implementation (risk factors, achievement conditions, first efforts and administration tools).

The methodology, the general structuring process and the phases of the process are illustrated in the following charts:



A negotiated legitimate result

1. Approval by the Representative Assembly

The strategy of making the entire university community part of the process produced the satisfactory approval of the Plan—in September 2004—by the Representative Assembly, which is the top authority in the University, responsible for the middle term policies.

2. Implementation of the Institutional Global Plan 2004-2011

The ongoing actions to ensure the Plan's implementation are the following:

2.1 Spreading

Objective: Inform about the main contents of the Plan, primarily, to the university authorities and, additionally, to the entire university community.

2.2 Training of authorities.

Objective: Prepare the authorities to make decisions related to changes in the academic and university administration strategies, as provided in the Institutional Global Plan.

2.3 Guidelines for the Annual Plan 2006

Objective: Adjust the academic, administrative, budgetary guidelines for the Annual Plan as provided in the Institutional Global Plan.

2.4 Preparation of a "Comprehensive Administration Chart".

Objective: Create a system of guidance and feedback for the decision-making process, to ensure the follow up and complete control on the execution of the institutional strategy through indicators and terms of reference created according to the Institutional Global Plan.

2.5 Preparation of a "Tactical Plan".

Objective: Establish priorities and specify actions, people responsible for the activities, resources and verification criteria to ensure the execution of the Global Plan in 3-year periods.

2.6 Reform of the institutional policies.

Objective: Ensure the reform of the institutional policies in accordance with the institutional development strategy stated in the Global Plan.

IV. The institutional policies and the international factor

Without doubt, the international factor affects the definition and enforcement of policies in the higher education institutions—particularly in a global context. This is especially true, in the case of universities with scientific communities that have dynamic, efficient connections with the world academic community.

In our experience, the international assistance has brought:

- a. An increasing incentive for quality improvement processes.

In this area, cooperation needs to find an adequate balance between the promotion of real international quality criteria, on one hand, and the valuation and consolidation of the efforts that are being developed, with discipline, in the country or region in which the projects are implemented, on the other hand.

The actual challenge is to avoid conflicts between the efforts and to make them phases of the same process, inspired by the same principles, and conducive to a quality product in which the contribution of all participants is highly appreciated. Only that way, the project will be developed as a joint action and any mistrust referred to an outside interest will be overcome.

- b. An incentive to strategic thinking, to the coordination of institutional transformation efforts and to the dynamism of the university administration.

The challenge for countries executing cooperation programs in developing nations is, in this case, to leave aside the proposal of preconceived models and, instead, to promote the exchange of experiences to create new proposals adjusted to the needs of the institution in which the project is being implemented.

- c. An incentive for the regional activity

At the present time, many programs promote joint activities among the universities of the same region. This strategy, which encourages the cooperation and expansion of positive effects, from our point of view, is in the right direction. However, it needs to prevent the multi-institutional structure from becoming an objective itself, leaving the most important objectives in a second place.

In many cases, the multi-institutional structure is so complex that it concentrates too many efforts. This may cause a deviation from the project's main purpose. It is necessary to design strategies to prevent that risk.

- d. An incentive to specific areas of the academic and social development.

Although, in most cases, the areas established are based on a previous assessment, only the permanent systematic dialogue between qualified participants from both parts may create a cooperation strategy based on mutual objectives that will benefit both institutions.

Some freedom, therefore, needs to be a special condition for cooperation projects.

- e. An incentive for the improvement of specific academic areas and institutional building projects.

It is a right strategy that has provided well-documented positive results when applied to both fields at the same time. The simultaneous action in these two areas provides mutual support, increasing the product, significantly. Therefore, we think that executing large programs comprised of many projects within the same institution gives better results, in terms of the essence of the changes and their sustainability.

- f. An essential factor for the new millennium university.

Today, the international presence is not just a desirable attribute; it has become gradually an indispensable requirement for the "new university". It is recognized as a unique and irreplaceable factor that complements and makes more dynamic the vision of an institution.

To illustrate this vision, we are going to mention some strengths associated to the international presence in the university, and we will indicate, at the same time, possible risks related to those strengths. Trying to create solutions for these pressures should be a concern for the participating institutions.

STRENGTHS	RISKS
The international organization has a “neutral” perspective of the institutional internal life, since it is not attached to positions or groups.	To be projected as a perspective that is unfamiliar with the institutional reality; a perspective that favors the technical factors because that is less complex, instead of considering the legitimate determinants of the institutional policy.
The international presence has a diverse perspective that enhances the institutional experience and makes it more representative overall.	To be projected as a “far” experience not related to the institutional experience.
The international institution has an authentic perspective. This may be achieved if the international counterpart has been chosen by the executing institution to satisfy specific objectives and challenges.	To be projected as a perspective of “superiority imposed on the executing institution”, particularly if the relation is not based on an authentic institutional reality.

V. Effectiveness in the international relations

Based on our experience, we may emphasize on some special **achievement conditions** for the effective cooperation and sustainable results between the institutions from industrialized countries and those from developing countries.

1. The institution in which the project is being implemented should be the one leading the process. The cooperating organization should accompany, guide, support and follow up the progress in accordance with the objectives agreed between both institutions.
2. The process should be evaluated by all participants. Periodic evaluations by external peers should be performed, as well.
3. The project should respond to the needs and requirements of the executing institution and not to the unilateral interest of the cooperating organization. This principle is crucial for the success of the projects and for the capacity building.
4. There should be contribution by both parties. When the process is established, it should be understood that both parties will have to make contributions. That way, both learn from the process and both are responsible for the results.

The institution executing the project has a great responsibility concerning the sustainability of the results.

5. No pre-established or superior model should be imported. The process involves the creation of alternatives based on the true dialogue and exchange of experiences between different institutions. All participants are important and all should be responsible for the results. Likewise, each participant should organize, with authenticity, his own history, situation and particular context.
6. The idea that true knowledge, that is, the knowledge that will support the sustainable comprehensive human development is originated in all groups of excellence, everywhere in the world, should be shared by both institutions. This means that closing the gaps is not just an ethic necessity, but a requirement in the development of science, in the new millennium. The contribution for scientific innovation should come from all cultural contexts.
7. The role played by the institutions of knowledge, in the promotion of development processes should be clear.
8. The creation of capacities in people and consequently, the generation of conditions to produce important cultural changes and work opportunities should be favored. The considerable investment in equipment and infrastructure only has meaning if it makes possible, reaffirms and displays those capacities.
9. Programs and processes should be promoted according to a broad perspective of the institutional development. The more comprehensive and multidimensional are the cooperation programs, the more sustainable is the effect. When there is no possibility to promote this kind of far-reaching proposals (the MHO Program may be an example) the following recommendations may be considered:
 - a. The program should incorporate crucial, cross-cutting elements that will have an effect on the entire institution and not just on an specific field
 - b. The program should recognize the relation between specific projects and other general processes of the institution to promote and plan “expansion” effects of the product and strategic connections.
10. Promotion of links. The promotion and creation of links by the cooperation program with several institutions and organizations of various countries means a great benefit.

The MHO Program, as it was developed and promoted by NUFFIC in Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica, serves as a model. The situation of the **Institutional Quality Development** Project speaks for itself in this aspect. It favored a direct relation with the following institutions:

Netherlands: Hogeschool Leiden; Free University of Amsterdam; Utrecht University; Tilburg University

Colombia: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana

In addition, it favored connections with other universities of the region: *Universidad de Talco, Chile; Universidad Católica del Perú*

It also favored study and analysis visits to the following universities in Colombia: *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana; Universidad Nacional; Universidad de Antioquia; Universidad EAFIT.*

11. The sustainability of results, as the focal point, should be taken into account during the planning and implementation of the program/project.

Throughout the project, the ideas and decisions tending to ensure the sustainability of the results may create the necessary conditions for this purpose.

VI. Recommendations:

The following recommendations are related to each one of the achievement conditions stated before.

Condition 1:

The actions resulting from the project, especially those introducing changes should be “institutionalized” gradually. It is not advisable to wait for the total institutionalization at the end of the project’s execution, since it may be more difficult then.

Condition 2

The evaluations of the process should be agreed from the beginning. The external peers should be, in fact, independent from the parties participating in the project. There should be a general commitment to improve the process based on the results obtained by the evaluation.

Condition 3

The methodology for the planning and approval of the project should take into account a close evaluation of the needs presented by the applicant institution. It must include both, the position of the institution in which the project will be executed and the independent criterion of a third party (the viewpoint of someone who will be no “part” of the project’s execution).

Condition 4

Although, the country financing the cooperation makes a considerable contribution to the project, the executing institution should also allocate resources to the project. This favors the commitment and the joint responsibility.

Condition 5

The plan’s implementation process should allow some freedom to improve the development of activities.

In our opinion, attaching importance to the historic and cultural background of the participants, during the orientation processes developed by the cooperating and the executing parties, may provide efficient and important results in less time.

Concentrating on technical aspects without considering the cultural factor may produce a negative effect.

Condition 6

An important requirement for the participants is to overcome the myths that place scientific knowledge in timeless, eternal, neutral spaces. The impact of history and culture on the development of a science or technology that could really promote economic growth and world development must be a premise for those committed to project execution.

Condition 7

Knowing the effect of universities—research, teaching and outreach areas—on the development processes, we should understand the importance of analyzing the academic outline of the institutions that seek to execute a project, based on their own needs. Under this condition and without promoting excluding criteria, we recommend to favor:

- Universities with an academic model more flexible to curricular changes, to emerging areas and to inter- and transdisciplinary work.
- Universities that are more opened to the interinstitutional work—with the private sector, government, NGOs, etc.—to cause the best effect on the improvement actions and processes.

Condition 8

The renewal of concepts and practice should be favored. Instruments and tools should be developed, changes should be systematized and analyzed, and determinants and standards should be established to contribute with the renewal. In our experience, the conceptual factor tends to be given too much importance to the detriment of the creation of tools. The incentive to pilot projects, with demonstrative effects, in the short term, as well as the preparation of participants to deal with the resistance to change are also important aspects to consider.

Condition 9

Specific projects (in specific areas) and institutional projects (with a comprehensive effect) should be stimulated. A balance should be established between the participative processes and the achievement of goals in the specific terms; the simultaneous and balanced progress should be coordinated with top authorities and core groups.

Condition 10

According to the nature of the project, the execution of initiatives with various participants may be promoted.

VII. International transformation

The execution of cooperation programs in specific regions, countries and universities is a very important task. The global changes are favored by the core groups promoting cooperation. However, this action should be complemented with smart initiatives to transform the positive changes into incentives for the improvement and support of the institutional changes.

It is fundamental for higher education systems to be globally organized to promote effective and coordinated decisions in the different regions. Some of the tasks requiring immediate attention are, in our opinion:

1. Control in the participation of new actors in the higher education context, based on the principles of quality and relevance.
2. Stimulation of a real pedagogical revolution and the complete reform of learning.
3. The strengthening of strategic thinking and the institutionalization of internationalization.

4. Promotion of a complete reform to the regulations of curriculum, to guarantee “compatibility” in the global systems, in order to ensure the attraction of students and professors.
5. Creation of incentives for productivity and for the performance of top personnel.
6. Promotion and diversification of the cooperation programs.
7. Defence of education as a social asset and the fight against the commercialization of knowledge processes.