

THE UNIVERSITY CRISIS

IN THE MODERN WORLD, THERE CAN BE NO ECONOMIC EXPANSION WITHOUT A HIGH QUALITY UNIVERSITY EDUCATION, AND ADEQUATE INVESTMENT IN UNIVERSITIES IS THE ONLY GUARANTEE FOR THE FUTURE.



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The *Generalitat* believes in the Catalan universities and is firmly convinced that Catalonia, like any country that aspires to a present and future of cultural, scientific and technological progress, needs more universities with all the material and human means necessary to carry out their functions and respond to the necessities and problems of society." With these encouraging words, in December 1986, the Director General of universities of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* ended, and more or less summed up, his programme.

The Catalan universities, transferred to the jurisdiction of the *Generalitat* in 1985, present a basic problem which is rather similar to that of the universities in other

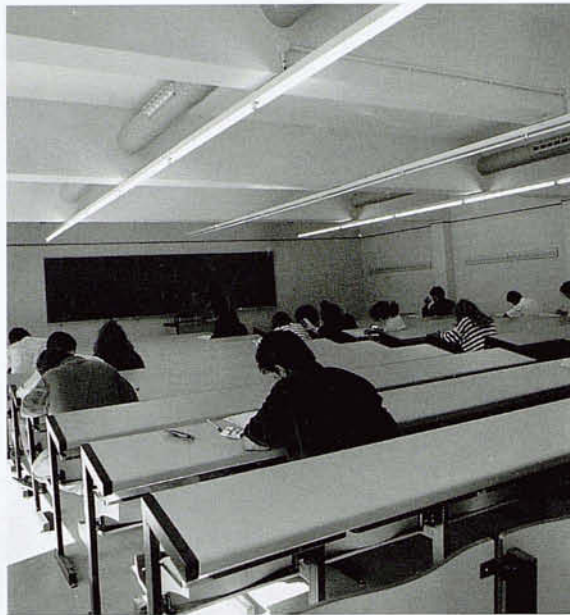
countries and to which must be added the problems of a university committed to a nation—Catalonia—which still has to fight for its own national reconstruction.

In general terms, the diagnosis made recently by M. Prigent with reference to the French universities could be perfectly well applied in the case of Catalonia. According to this diagnosis, the universities today are faced with three parallel crises: one of identity, one of faith and one of means.

With regard to the first, the discussion and definition of what our university must be is obviously more present than ever, although it is rarely stated clearly because of the very conflictivity of the subject. Should the university be selective? And

how rigorously? Or, on the other hand, is its mission to provide higher qualifications to the greatest possible number of the population, in spite of the risks of the subsequent student massification?

Should the university's priority be to provide an education meant basically to prepare for the practice of a particular profession in a pre-designed post? Or, on the other hand, should it allow an integrated cultural training that ignores economic preoccupations and market demands? As for the graduates, which is more important, the number or the quality? Should we accept as inevitable the relegation in status of basic university studies and transfer the old university ideals to the postgraduate courses? ...



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These questions, here put at their bluntest, have still not been answered today. And there is no doubt that, put to university circles, they would lead to long and hard discussions and the adoption of very different positions. And we might also get not a few surprises, for example, when we heard a businessman connected to some university's *Consell Social* defending the idea that engineers should study more philosophy, or that the most important quality for which the university student should prepare himself is the ability to adapt to the ever more rapidly changing socio-economic and technological necessities.

The crisis of identity, then, is at present being lived intensely in the Catalan universities. But there is a definite tendency to tackle these problems boldly, and this, coupled with the determination to move forward, shown by those responsible for running the universities, suggest that it will be possible to progress rapidly towards valid and widely adopted definitions, in spite of the inevitable inertia that exists in a complex social group such as the university.

As for the crisis of faith, I would go so far as to say that in Catalonia, although it exists, it is very much mitigated by the particular socio-political trends of the last few years. Even though it is true that a certain mistrust is detectable in certain social sectors as to what the university is capable of, it is also true that the university maintains a great social prestige and there is

still the conviction that Catalonia and its university community will be able to take advantage of the small but real margin of autonomy that Spanish laws give it, and will be able to develop an efficient, modern university, adapted to the needs of today.

Finally, the crisis of means, which is, indeed, particularly serious here. The universities that the state administration handed over to the *Generalitat* suffer from severe shortages, especially regarding buildings, infrastructure and equipment. Furthermore, the financial resources available, though plentiful in absolute terms, are relatively quite insufficient considering the needs that have to be covered. It must be said, although it is so obvious it might seem a cliché, that if our university teaching is to reach a high quality, it demands a very great social and economic effort, since the number of university students is very high (137,000 in Catalonia in 1986-87) and shows a tendency to rise considerably over the next few years.

Also, if we bear in mind that the quantities allocated to the Catalan universities by the *Generalitat's* budget are more than double those assigned to the majority of departments of the *Generalitat* itself, it is clear that the universities' financial problems can only be solved at the level of the state finances, since the possibility of increasing expenditure in the *Generalitat's* budget depends basically on the allocation foreseen in the state administration's budget.

The state government (which has also held on to important responsibilities in the university field, such as the regulation of student entry to the universities) is the only organism which can and must resolve the shortcomings of the Spanish university system, which, according to a recent comment by a prestigious economist, "has placed the Spanish universities, in terms of numbers of students and academic fees, in a situation characteristic of a community in a comfortable financial condition, when this is not, by a long way, the case in Spain."

The government of Catalonia and those of the universities themselves can have a positive influence in this crisis, making the best possible use of resources and increasing them within the possibilities of their own budgets, which will, however, always be relatively limited. At the same time, they can act on the state political organs in which they participate, to make the state administration tackle the problem coherently and efficiently.

The conviction that in the modern world there can be no economic expansion without a high quality university education, and that adequate investment in universities is the only guarantee for the future of a country like ours, will, we hope, lead to the necessary mobilization of our political and social movements to ensure a prompt solution to the crisis and an adequate level of university teaching and research in Catalonia. ●