

# Plan KUUDO: An Experiment in a New Dimension of University Responsibility

By ANDREW M. TORRES

Several recent papers<sup>1</sup> have discussed the new dimension of responsibility of North American universities in providing technical assistance to foreign universities which are currently undergoing far-reaching and significant changes. The need and justification of technical assistance to Latin American universities and institutes as part of the over-all social and economic development of Latin American republics have been concisely and convincingly stated by Atcon.<sup>2</sup>

Many Latin American nations now find themselves in the position of having vast undeveloped natural resources, but, at the same time, they are lacking in the ability to take complete and efficient advantage of this potential wealth for want of the necessary human resources. Most nations can readily import advanced technologies, but are not able to maintain and expand them with locally available technicians, much less contribute to their further development. As a result of this difficulty, many technological and scientific centers in foreign countries have sought the assistance of countries having the capabilities to provide it.

<sup>1</sup> Harold Enarson, "The Universities' Stake in the Developing Nations," *Educational Record*, Vol. 45, 1964, pp. 27-32. Frank Bowles, "American Responsibilities in International Education," *Educational Record*, Vol. 45, 1964, pp. 19-26. Clyde E. Kelsey, Jr., "A New Dimension of Responsibility for Higher Education," *Educational Record*, Vol. 46, 1965, pp. 346-350.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolph P. Atcon, "The Latin American University: A Key for an Integrated Approach to the Coordinated Social Economic and Educational Development of Latin America," 1963. Tegucigalpa, Honduras. (Mimeographed).

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It is readily obvious that there has been a growing concern on the part of North American university professors and administrators in exchange programs with Latin American institutions. Part of the current response has stemmed from the general realization on the part of the public, the government, and various funding agencies that, besides material aid, the developing nations of the world are in need of industrial, but especially educational, technical assistance.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps such aid is simply the logical extension of the principle that the more developed nations have the responsibility to assist in the progress of the developing nations; whatever the reasons or motivations, the number and depth of involvement of the United States institutions in academic projects in Latin America are indications of the extent to which this responsibility is being accepted.

The exchanges range from individual affiliations to programs involving an institution-to-institution cooperative effort. There are several funding agencies in such programs, both private and governmental. Particular interest has been shown in higher education, but some programs have centered on secondary, and even on primary, levels. Examples of some recent or current programs have been cited by Mitchell.<sup>4</sup> All of the Latin American republics and most of their universities now have or are planning exchange programs which may involve the larger institution-to-institution cooperative efforts, or which may be simply a matter of one or more nonaffiliated

<sup>3</sup> L. G. Geiger, "The Indian Universities and the American Experience," *AAUP Bulletin*, Spring, 1967 pp. 15-21.

<sup>4</sup> Willard H. Mitchell, *CSUCA: A Regional Strategy of Higher Education in Central America*, Center of Latin American Studies, The University of Kansas, 1967.

North American educators being recruited by a Latin American university.

The Universidad de Oriente-University of Kansas project will be discussed more fully as one example of a program that has enjoyed some measure of success. But first it may be useful to enumerate some of the elements common to the projects, and then follow the course of the development of the Universidad de Oriente-University of Kansas effort.

Since the needs of each institution are unique, it would be naïve to attempt to apply any particular program to a new situation—even if the effort has already been proven successful on a previous occasion. Nevertheless, there are certain requirements which can be mentioned as virtually indispensable for initiating international educational cooperative projects in higher education. The basic elements include: (1) a recognition on the part of the institution's administration that a need exists; (2) a plan for obtaining the desired assistance which may include a loan to purchase equipment and supplies, to construct buildings, to send personnel abroad for advanced training, to bring in competent replacements, and to acquire technical aid in certain critical but not strictly academic areas, such as purchasing, library and book-store; (3) locating a funding agency willing to support the plan by means of a loan, a grant or both.

The underlying philosophy in all such plans is that they are related to the needs of the country. It is unrealistic for a university to produce Ph. D.'s in physics, for example, if such persons cannot find gainful local employment when they terminate their studies.

Plan KUUDO (although it did not have this name at that time) was the idea of a brilliant educator who had the vision of establishing an experimental university in the underdeveloped eastern part of Venezuela. The result of long and careful planning was an institution with its principal center in Cumaná, state of Sucre, in northeastern Venezuela, and called, appropriately, the Universidad de Oriente (the "UDO" in KUUDO). The other centers are located in Ciudad Bolívar, state of Bolívar, in Jusepín, state of Monagas, and in Puerto La Cruz, state of Anzoátegui. A fifth center under development is located on the Island of Margarita, which, together with a few smaller islands, constitutes the state of Nueva Esparta. The same man whose idea it was to found UDO, Dr. Luis Manuel Peñalver, became its first rector-president when classes began in 1960.

Dr. Peñalver is a patriot who desires to help produce the human resources necessary to the development of the material resources of eastern Venezuela,

presently the poorest section of the country. Thus, from the beginning, his ideas have all been related to the country's needs. He early realized that his own staff, recruited from many parts of the world, was not trained sufficiently to produce the caliber of liberally educated professionals needed. In addition, his faculty were products of a centuries-old traditional pattern of higher education,<sup>5</sup> and therefore somewhat reluctant to initiate and incorporate some of the academic reforms propounded in the founding charter of the university.

Barbara Waggoner has concisely described UDO and compared it with traditional Latin American Universities,<sup>6</sup> while George Waggoner has succinctly compared Latin American and United States universities.<sup>7</sup> In what ways is UDO different from other Latin universities? In the first place, it is not autonomous, but rather a dependency of the Ministry of Education. Its funds derive from the same source, and it does not have territorial autonomy, the source of so much difficulty in other universities in Latin America. It is an experimental institution free to try new educational ideas and new academic programs. Perhaps most important, it is dedicated to the proposition that all students should have a liberal education during their first two years of university studies. In most other Latin American schools, students immediately declare their professional aspirations and directly enter a professional school and a professional course of studies.

Another important and unusual feature of UDO is the organization of academic units into departments.<sup>8</sup> In the majority of Latin universities, a faculty of Medicine, for example, will include professors of foreign languages, mathematics, and so on, resulting in incalculable duplication of facilities and untold waste of human and material resources.<sup>9</sup> UDO is further unusual in that, with rare exceptions, it employs only full-time professors. It was felt, then, that to implement the guide lines laid down for UDO, outside assistance was required.

The immediate plan was to concentrate on the basic sciences: biology, chemistry, mathematics, and

<sup>5</sup>Harold R. W. Benjamin, *Higher Education in the American Republics*. McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965. Atcon, *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara Waggoner, "The Latin American University in Transition," Occasional Publication No. 5, Center of Latin American Studies, The University of Kansas, 1965, pp. 17-21.

<sup>7</sup>George Waggoner, "Algunas Diferencias entre las Universidades Publicas de Latinoamerica y las de los Estados Unidos," Segunda Ser. No. 1, Univ. Aut. Nac. de Nicaragua, November 1966, pp. 47-50.

<sup>8</sup>Atcon, *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>Benjamin, *Ibid.*, p. 205. George R. Waggoner, "Problems in the Professionalization of the University Teaching Career in Central America," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, 1966, pp. 193-194.

weeks of intensive English before attempting to attend classes, but in general this was not enough, and English continued to be a problem for some time. At the UDO end, despite having had instruction in Spanish prior to leaving the United States, several of the Kansas junior professors were unable to teach immediately; but after one semester all were contributing to the teaching programs. Becoming accustomed to a new cultural pattern, adjusting to a new climate, learning the nuances of telephone conversation, and becoming adapted to the relative lack of services and certain products all constituted minor problems which were, in most cases, readily overcome. Adjustments on the part of the Venezuelan scholars at KU, although of a different nature, were similarly required, and quickly made. More serious adjustments were needed at both ends in such academic subjects as method of instruction and grading and examination systems.<sup>10</sup>

At this writing, the project has been in operation for two years, and perhaps a preliminary evaluation of its effectiveness can be made by reviewing some of the original objectives and comparing them with what has been accomplished.

Several urgent, but rather routine, objectives were accomplished quite early in the program, and some of these have already been mentioned; viz., ordering furniture for the laboratories, books, laboratory equipment, and supplies. Others took considerable planning but were also achieved in a matter of months. As a prelude for planning curriculum changes, periodic departmental staff meetings were initiated to assure that the faculty was informed of problems and contributed to the planning. A side effect was the closer integration of the departments, previously lacking because of the virtual separation of the faculty members who taught advanced courses (the more experienced and specialized staff) from those who taught the introductory courses (the less experienced staff). In some departments, it was possible to design courses so that the more experienced members could contribute to the teaching of the beginning courses, thus not only exposing more students to the more experienced teachers, but providing a common interest for all members of the department.

Curriculum reform required considerable effort, as the members of the departments represented a spectrum of backgrounds, ideas, and values. Many were products of the very curriculum being altered and were therefore reluctant to approve drastic changes, since to do so implied that their training was less than ideal. Linked with curriculum change

was the introduction of a credit system in place of a traditional *pensum* system. Both the curriculum, standard with slight variations in most of Latin America, and the *pensum* system merit additional comment.

Curricula are typically far too crammed with courses to be effective.<sup>11</sup> They demand course loads of 20-24 credit hours per semester, so that in five years the students have accumulated the equivalent of 200 or more credits, most often with considerably more than 100 of these from the major department. Two serious effects of such curricula can be stated succinctly; one is that it destroys curiosity on the part of the student, in that he is so occupied struggling to keep up with his many courses that he cannot afford the time to browse in the library, or to inquire more deeply into some area or topic which may be of genuine interest to him. The second effect is that the student is asked to do so much that little or none of it is done well. These two factors alone contribute heavily toward dooming the student, with rare exceptions of course, to intellectual mediocrity. The *pensum* system practically guarantees it.

A *pensum* is a system of instruction whereby the student, usually upon entering the university, declares his professional aspirations. He immediately begins his study as, say, a first semester biology student. Then he, along with all the others who started with him, becomes a second semester biology student, and so on throughout his university experience which generally consists of ten semesters. We note that he is passing from semester to semester quite independently and virtually isolated from other biology students who happen to be in a different semester of study. He is thereby limited to his own group and has little or no opportunity to derive any intellectual stimulation through the exchange of ideas with either the more or the less advanced students. In addition, a *pensum* system makes no allowance for individual capacities, and allows for individual interests only in the occasional elective courses allowed. Another interesting effect is that such a system forces a department to offer five different blocks of courses each semester to accommodate the five even or the five odd semester groups. Needless to say, considerable manpower is required to sustain such a program.

As a result of splendid efforts on the parts of all concerned, curricula were revised and put into effect, and course loads were reduced to the extent that the average semester load is between 16 and 17 credit hours, although from 80 to 90 credits are still required in the major area of study. As can be seen,

<sup>10</sup> Academic Missionary (Anon.), "On Being Academic Abroad," *AAUP Bulletin*, Autumn, 1966. pp. 334-340.

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the curricula were the products of compromise; by United States standards, they are still very demanding. The *pensum* system was abandoned in favor of a credit system which is being initiated in a rather ponderous step-wise fashion; it will be years before its full effect is noted. There is little doubt that the implementation of even these modest, but basic, reforms will contribute significantly to the progress of UDO and to Latin American higher education.

Of urgency also was the finding of competent personnel for the office of Director of the School of Sciences and for the chairmanships of the science departments; the former position was vacant and the latter had been operating with acting chairmen. UDO was very fortunate in obtaining as the Director of the School of Sciences a well-qualified, energetic Latin who is a United States trained Ph.D. with wide experience in Latin American universities. Ideally, it would be much better to have a staff of nationals, as they lend more stability, but in this and in several other instances, none was available. Well-qualified chairmen have been found for three of the four departments. All three are Latins and two are nationals; the third, however, plans to remain indefinitely. A search is still being conducted to find a suitable chairman for the fourth department.

It became obvious as the program progressed that improvements were needed in several nonacademic areas affecting the efficiency of the classroom instruction and the research efforts; in addition, basic changes in emphasis were needed in the plan itself as a result of changing conditions at UDO. The two-year renewal (1967-1969) proposal makes allowances for both aspects, and provides the initial steps towards phasing-out the plan.

Considered as the first phase-out measure, the renewal does not provide for the use of junior professors; their elimination is permitted by the return of

the first group of scholars who have, in most cases, equivalent training. Advisers as such are no longer considered necessary, and will be replaced by visiting professors—men with the same qualifications as the advisers but whose function will be to set standards of teaching and to initiate local research projects. The scholarship program, the most valuable aspect of the plan, will continue unchanged. To assist in the improvement of such ancillary areas as purchasing, library and bookstore management, the renewal contemplates the use of short-term specialists in these and other areas; experts who will come to Cumaná for varying periods of time to assist and to advise the local staff in improving their services to support better the teaching and research missions of the university.

It should be made amply clear that all that has been accomplished has been possible because of the support of UDO administrators, as the advisers had no administrative authority whatever, and of themselves could accomplish nothing. Changes were the result of fine cooperative effort on the part of all concerned.

It may be noted that all the participants have gained from the exchange in ways which have more than compensated for the small sacrifices involved. Aside from the satisfaction of having contributed to a worthwhile project, less tangible benefits have been derived from exposure to a different culture, learning a foreign language, making lasting friendships, and gaining and contributing to an understanding between North and Latin Americans, particularly in the social and academic areas. In the long run, this could be of inestimable significance.

It is hoped that, in the future, there will be more United States universities involved in programs similar to Plan KUUDO, and that more of our altruistic professors will contribute to them. It is a rewarding and educational experience.