

Observations from the Principal

This speech was delivered by the Principal of the Universidad Tecnológica Pereira, the esteemed Engineer Luis Enrique Arango Jiménez at the celebration of the accreditation of UTP.

Acceptance speech

1st September 2005

Speaking today of the accreditation and thus of quality control it is fitting to provide a brief history of its antecedents. The National Accreditation System was brought into being in 1992 under Law 30 and with it the National Council of Higher Education (CESU) as a means of organising and regulating the system. It is my opinion that the powerful movement for change within in the higher education system in Colombia is due to three articles of Law 30. These I will read to you now for they are not long.

Article 53.

A national system of accreditation for institutions of higher education shall be created as a guarantee to society that the institutions under its remit meet with the most stringent standards of quality control. Furthermore it will ensure that they fulfil their goals and objectives.

Affiliation to the System of accreditation will be voluntary.

Accreditation will be of a finite nature. All institutions that receive accreditation will benefit from the prerogatives established in the Law and as a result of the authority of the National Council of Higher Education (CESU).

Article 54.

The system as outlined in the preceding article will be constituted by a National Council of Accreditation, composed of academic and scientific communities amongst others. It will in turn be subordinate to the National Council of Higher Education (CESU) that is responsible for the delineation of the duties and members of the former.

Article 55.

Self-evaluation will be a constant task of higher education institutions and will form an integral part of the accreditation system.

There is no doubt as to the visionary status of the legislator when he included higher education institutions in a voluntary schema of quality control. Much less when we consider that this is grounded in a systematised process of self-evaluation. This is ultimately to

demand that every institution assume autonomy over itself by entering into a process of self-questioning and assessment.

The impact of this ruling on the struggle for quality and its outcomes is beyond doubt. The efficient use of resources, the increase in intellectual production and the level of research in universities can be traced back to the demands of this influential thinker.

It isn't an original idea. Other countries have long since established processes of certification. However thanks to this idea Colombia was able to implement the recommendation at an opportune moment in its history and in this way take up a leading role in comparison with other countries. The early evolution and development of the idea have meant that the National Council of Accreditation's (CNA) organisation and experience are now studied as a model for implementation far beyond our own borders. More interestingly it opens the way for the National Council of Accreditation to offer consultancy services to other countries.

As a consequence of this we begin to detect agreements between sister institutions in countries with similar accreditation systems. This fosters mutual recognition of university titles and over time this will invariably result in the increased mobility of academic communities and a boom in the international job market.

The Quality Control System for Higher Education governed by the CNA not only accredits those programmes that meet with certain standards of quality control; it also accredits those institutions that have a certain number of accredited programmes over a range of subjects. This facilitates the evaluation of the institution as a whole and is known as Institutional Accreditation and is granted for a given period of time only.

The Universidad Tecnológica Pereira initially accredited three programmes, this in the year 2000. Those were: Electrical Engineering, Industrial Engineering and Medicine; it then accredited a further three in 2001: Mechanical Engineering, Sports and Leisure Science and Mechanical Technology.

Having fulfilled the minimum requirements to qualify for institutional accreditation the Board of Governors decided to create a Supervisory Committee for the processes of self-evaluation and accreditation. The strategy was launched immediately with the aim of providing support throughout the quality control reform. At the end of that same year, 2002, the CNA was approached and requested to corroborate that the university had indeed fulfilled the criteria to qualify for accreditation. Henceforth began the formal process of accreditation. That process is happily brought to an official conclusion today.

In today's world official acts of quality certification are irreversible and they make all the difference. In the same way that knowledge has superseded the importance of capital in production so quality is becoming a dominant concern in the commercialisation of goods and services. Processes, products, organisations, management, skills, professions etc. are all certified and to stand aside is to resign oneself to a slow and arduous death. Globalisation brings competition and with it the need to subscribe to systems of quality control that guarantee developments and create points of reference at a regional, national and

international level.

It is impossible to build a competitive system if there are no markers of quality. The university has understood its importance and for this reason joins voice with those who believe in accreditation at all levels. University programmes have been and are being accredited, university laboratories have been and are being accredited, the administration department in charge of quality control is currently being accredited under Act ISO 9001-2000 and the institution as a whole has also been accredited. For this reason the University has received a seven-year Institutional Accreditation from the Ministry of Education.

What we are celebrating today is the culmination of many years of hard work and commitment on the part of many people. So it is that we have chosen to come together and join with the university community and those guests who have honoured us today with their presence today.

As with every human invention, our University has its own history, one we have helped to create with love devotion and generation-on-generation of perseverance. Each and everyone of those people through their actions, their decisions, their leadership, have helped to form the University that today Pereira proudly offers to its citizens and to Colombia.

If we are here today marking the accreditation of the university as an institution of excellence then it is thanks in part to all those people who over the years made definitive contributions in visionary and indispensable ways to the history of the university. They sowed the first seed and opened the way forward and I feel obliged for this reason to remember them today.

For those of us who today have the university's fate in our hands, it falls to us to carry on the work of looking after the shared social and intellectual heritage that is our university. It is our duty to maintain the position the academic community of the university now holds at a regional and national level.

I firmly believe that human beings have always been and will always be susceptible to the power of recognition. It is sometimes the most effective tool in mobilising our forces in pursuit of an ideal, more so than material incentives. Therefore in the name of justice and as a question of principle I will not hold back when it comes to celebrating the work of others.

I would like to pay homage and give thanks to all those people who have passed through this university and built through hard work and determination the foundations on which this social enterprise stands. They may not be with us now but they are the foundations of this temple of knowledge that in belonging to the citizens of Pereira and the inhabitants of Risaralda also belongs to the Colombian people and will always be at their service.

I feel it my duty to recall with respect and admiration the original Principals and founders: Jorge Roa Martínez and Guillermo Angel Ramírez; and all those that followed after them: Pablo Oliveros Marmolejo, Q.E.P.D., Juan Guillermo Angel Mejía, Guillermo Guzmán Londoño, Samuel Eduardo Salazar Echeverri, Gabriel Jaime Cardona Orozco Restrepo, Javier Arroyave Ochoa and Carlos Alberto Ossa. All the above are remarkable for their honesty and spirit of sacrifice in the face of every obstacle.

Also, the deputy Principals, the Deans, the Directors of Studies, the teachers, the administrative staff, the workers, the students and the whole community that today can rightfully enjoy the fruits of their labour.

Only a team of enthusiastic and committed workers such as the Universidad Tecnológica Pereira has today can create the momentum necessary to carry forth the improvements that an institution of category demands. We have a team determined to face the future with optimism, casting aside all negativity and relishing the challenge of being everyday a better university. There aren't many organisations with the managerial team that this university boasts, I congratulate them too for their deliberation and encourage them to go forwards fighting along the path of excellence.

However the Institutional accreditation granted to the UTP is not a mission accomplished; it is not an end in itself, on the contrary, it is a great responsibility and a huge challenge for the future. The quality control systems are, after all, planned within a logic of continuous improvement and require unstinting commitment if they are to be met.

These processes of enrichment may well reveal those strengths that meet with standards of quality, however they also highlight the opportunities for improvement, always in search of that elusive excellence. It, and by this I mean of course Excellence, is not a port of call; it is a moving target, a road and a frontier at the same time, it celebrates the measure of accomplishment and yet at the same time unfolds eternally into the future showing up new paths and pursuits with every step.

Standards of quality are not static, they shift with the system as it improves, when all is said and done the best will always be an elite group a step ahead pulling others into line. This is how I perceive the status of accreditation, as a state of transition where nothing can be defined in terms of absolutes; we are in front but others follow with the hunger to get ahead. It is a healthy rivalry that the system of higher education seeks to encourage.

So you see this accreditation is not the chance to lie back and relax, it is in fact the opposite. We take on the enormous challenge to carry on improving, to overcome the challenges that each day offers and to validate ceaselessly the great honour that the State of Colombia has granted us.

It must be recognised that in the first five years of the twenty first century our University has changed in ways unimaginable, it is fair to say that more has been achieved in these five years than in the last 39 years of the last century.

We have built a mark of reference that contrasts 1999, dawn of the 21st century, with 2005. It demonstrates marked progress across the board:

Category	1999	2005
Undergraduate students	4,272	9,193
Postgraduate students	278	605

Ratio of students to full time teaching staff	9	19
Approved undergraduate programmes	20	31
Approved Masters	5	12
Programmes accredited with superior quality	0	8
Teachers engaged in doctoral studies	13	47
Teachers with doctorate	13	31
Research groups registered with Colciencias	2	70
Research groups officially recognised by Colciencias	2	28
Completed research projects	58	183
Research projects co-funded by Colciencias	9	39
Research projects co-funded by other external bodies	22	84
Participation in centres of excellence	0	2
Annual budget for research	\$1.081 m	\$3.487m
Annual budget for investment in the library	\$24m	273m
Relation of university funds to total Budget	\$11.43	\$18.75m

If you were to ask me what were the defining factors in the transformation of the university into a model of progress, thirsty for results, I would not hesitate in highlighting the change of attitude. The university has abandoned the reactionary and backwards looking position it assumed in the past, always proselytising and hiding behind the all too predictable argument of vested interests. Claiming also hidden motives for privatisation or bemoaning the threat posed to Public Universities. I think that in this day and age most people appreciate the need for change if we are to realise our duties with greater efficiency, they take it as read that it is the management of change that holds the key to success: there will always be new theories on how to build the wheel.

This by no means that the university has become a sea of conformity, on the contrary it continues to question and is little inclined to bow down meekly. Instead it is suspicious of everything not with the aim of obstructing change but so as to better accomplish it. The community wants to have its voice heard and in faith it has to be listened to.

The university ought to be a centre of debate and of open and informed criticism, never

whimsical or off the cuff. Sometimes I am ashamed to think of the time wasted on short term political scheming instead of being invested in concerted action. However at the end of the day the university is just that: a hub of contrast and confrontation and we must never settle for anything else.

We have respected opinions of others without surrendering our right to confront them with dignity and courage. This is how a university should be, a place for everyone, without hegemony, a place where we can learn to listen to and respect one another. I work on the basis of a single truth - the only truth I know; that I do not own the truth.

The university needs to be a place of transition where personal interest gives way to the interests of the majority and the quest for rationality; I cannot imagine a militant university that only recognises one way of doing things.

I think that our university has a unique legacy within the social imaginary; it is one of the few institutions of its kind to boast a level of legitimacy and credibility. It would be a great shame to throw this privilege into the common grave simply as a result of not having had the sensitivity to value our fortunate position as a university.

A university should be a place of meeting, a forum for exchange, a place where we learn to respect diversity and appreciate difference. It presents the challenge to think to the future.

Universidad Tecnológica Pereira aspires to precisely this, it is with this in mind that the university community goes about its day-to-day existence, putting into practice the future it wants to be.

I would like to draw special attention to the people of the region who have always stood by the university, their support has made all the difference: the university has felt the warmth of that support, it has felt accompanied; the people of Pereira and of Risaralda see the university as theirs and are of one voice when it comes to its defence. We have seen the proof when the institution has been threatened for one or other reason.

The political establishment has also shown respect for the university and its right to autonomy; this university has never been prey to duplicitous intentions. Indeed politicians have helped to preserve an ethos free of external pressures allowing it to genuinely develop as an enterprise for knowledge where the academic concerns reign supreme. Comparisons are of little use but I can safely say that this has not been the case in other parts of the world where the outcomes have been lamentable.

There is an army of over 15 thousand graduates of all disciplines scattered throughout the country and across the world, who bear with pride the insignia of UTP. Today they delight in the honour bestowed this university by the government. They know perfectly well that they will be the first to benefit from this accreditation for it will enhance their academic credentials which from this moment on enjoy the same advantage as the university in receiving the official stamp of quality. The same is to be said for our current students and for those to come.

Notwithstanding the cause for celebration that unites us today, the university knows that the hardest work has yet to come: we still have an enormous debt to pay.

We are seeking to improve the level of technical and technological training; we have yet to be satisfied. We share in the concerns of President Uribe in this respect. Our university is a pioneer in the field of technology; it was the first in the country to offer an accredited programme in the subject. Today we are called upon to help reposition technical degrees within the education system and champion the solutions that will achieve this, giving technical training continuity and pertinence within the higher education programme.

We are not content with the exceptionally high drop-out rates that the university is experiencing, something innovative has to be done to tackle the problem. The level of poverty - all too apparent - thwarts our ambitions and we must all unite in the face of this challenge. It is imperative that we take steps to improve social equality.

We want to reinforce our practice research; if we are to develop effectively we must apply the theory and its innovations to reality. We have to assume an authoritative role in the creation of a Regional Science Technology and Innovation programme.

We have yet to be satisfied by our progress in bilingual education; we may have taken great steps in imposing a basic level of English for all graduate students but there is still a lot to do, we have to make bilingual education a norm for the community as a whole.

Yes, we are happy; however we know there are huge challenges ahead; especially in terms of what society expects of us. We are well aware of those aspirations and of the responsibility and leadership the task demands. It is a task we shall continue to fulfil to the best of our ability, with gusto, without ever shying away from the responsibility it entails for each of us, whether professional or personal, be it individual, collective or generational.

The advantages that Institutional Accreditation implies, the incentives it offers must be taken advantage of in order to carry on recruiting students from the region and beyond that from the network of alliances that have already benefited from existing infrastructures.

Esteemed Minister of Education I would like to make public our gratitude for your constant support; furthermore I entreat you to pass on our thanks to the President for his unflinching commitment to our cause and for the encouragement we feel whenever he makes reference to us. Maybe it is for this reason that we have taken on his project with such devotion; we continue to fight for quality in education and will carry on doing so because we know that this country will only succeed in reducing poverty by advancing in higher education.

I would also like to recognise the altruism of the Supreme Council that has worked relentlessly for the future of the university: it has been our guiding light and our company, it has taken many wise decisions on our behalf, charting our course steadily north towards our coveted goal.

Equally I give thanks to all our teaching staff - full time, transitory and temporary. Thank you for contributing through your respective subjects to the building of a great university. I invite those of you who have been strangers to the process to join us now in the battle for quality in higher education.

In the midst of our jubilation I would like to remember those who have passed on, those who though retired celebrate this triumph as their own, those who are not able to be with us today, indeed everyone who contributed in one way or another to making us feel victorious today.

Last of all my friends I give thanks to Life for giving me the opportunity to be Principal of Universidad Tecnológica Pereira, a great university full of talent and bearing an enormous sense of commitment. I hope to carry on leading the way as best as possible, always giving the maximum to this noble enterprise that demands the same commitment from us all.

Congratulations to our graduates across the ages. Thank you, thank you very much to you all.

LUIS ENRIQUE ARANGO JIMENÉZ

Fuente: <http://www2.utp.edu.co/english/institutional/213/observations-from-the-principal>

