

Title

Strengthen governance through building research agendas

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Keywords

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ABSTRACT:

Universidad Nacional (UNAL) is the main public university in Colombia. UNAL policy-makers have done several efforts in order to increase institutional competitiveness levels. Thematic Research Agendas (TRA) initiative was developed from 2010 to 2012 and it was supported by UNAL policy-makers and researchers. That initiative had several long-term targets such as i) improve efficiency and governance in innovation systems, ii) find a way to invest in different relevant topics, and iii) create new knowledge to break time lags.

The aim of this paper is to show how building research agendas contribute to strengthen institutional innovation governance in two aspects. First one related to the institutional performance and second topic related to the actors behaviors. That analysis was made through a three steps methodology which includes: i) a brief analysis of previous experiences; ii) a description of the current initiative and, iii) the analysis of the innovation governance improvement after TRA.

Regards to the institutional perspective the process has left a methodology for building research agendas as a systematic process. The implementation of competitive intelligence tools as a long-term perspective planning is a breakpoint between previous innovation policies in the UNAL.

From the institutional strengthening governance perspective TRA proposed several answers and solutions for structural society problems in different areas. In some agendas the process goes more away defining budget for prior projects. Related to actors behaviors based on the research agendas process they gain in several ways such as knowledge between them, prepare research initiatives and projects, establish issues priorities.

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INTRODUCTION:

The government of Colombia has made efforts to increase the competitiveness levels of the country. There are several activities that institutions of the government have developed in the past; in accordance with this idea, one of them is defining research agendas.

In this context, Colombian universities would be a main stone of the economic change. First at all, universities are the principal actor of Colombian Innovation System; due to their nature, they are in charge to generate knowledge to add value to strategic goods and services, secondly, universities are the leader in terms of human capital.

Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UNAL) is one of the most important universities in Colombia, and promotes equal access to the higher education system to Colombian citizens. It was founded 144 years ago, and it has 8 branches located all over the country¹. UNAL have almost 50.000 students (40.000 of them are undergraduate students and around 10.000 are postgraduate students), around 3000 professors and 2000 of them are researchers (Sanchez-Torres, 2011).

The main goals of the UNAL are to assimilate critically and to create knowledge in order to solve the most demanding national problems, to advice the Country in their solution as well as to participate in all social sectors of the Colombian nation, as the

¹ http://www.unal.edu.co/english/contenido/sobre_un/sobreun_naturaleza.htm

beneficiaries of its own academic and research activities. In that sense, in different opportunities the UNAL has tried to defined research agendas with diverse results.

Finally, we understand governance as the systems and practices that governments use to set priorities and agendas, implement policies and obtain knowledge about their impacts and effectiveness (OCDE, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The state of the art did not provide us with published works exactly matching with this research; for this reason, in order to achieve our goal we have implemented three steps:

- i. Identify and describe previous experiences for building institutional agendas. This step pretends to show briefly how UNAL policy-makers tried to plan the research activities in the past.
- ii. Describe and analyze current experience. This step is necessary for understanding the components of the Thematic Research Agenda Project, TRA, the methodological framework and its porpoises.
- iii. Describe how UNAL governance had been improved. This step considers several topics categorized in two aspects that evidence the innovation governance improvement, the effect of TRA in the institution and actor's behavior.

EXPECTED RESULTS

We have divided the expected results in three sections according to the approach proposed before.

1.1. Previous experiences for building agendas at UNAL

UNAL has tried to generate systems for identifying which are its research capabilities in terms of generating knowledge, at least four times, thus during 1990-1993 it was designed Research Universities Programs, RUP, UN (1999a); then Institutional Action Fields, IAF, supported by Strategic Programs, SP during 1999-2003 (Brijaldo and Campos, 2000); later, the SP were defined based on academic networks during 2007-2009 (UN, 2007).

However, in spite of these initiatives identified knowledge strategic areas did not work accurately cause there was not systematic, structure information that supports them.

1.2. Current experience “Knowledge Agendas”

During 2010-2012, the UNAL's main research management office designed and implemented a special project called “UNAL foresight – Knowledge Agendas”, Institutional Research Agendas Project (IRAP), as a collective process, for building a shared future vision of the University and its influence on STI issues on the country.

IRAP considered the following definition suggested by Molina *et al* (2012) a “research agenda is target identification with their respective goals and commitments to achieve in short, medium and long term, based to the mission and needs of the institution and the social, cultural and economic context. This exercise has a foresight perspective and a systematic approach and deep analysis about the future of the corresponding area under a comprehensive view of research² and including other two mission activities³”.

The IRAP was based on the idea that to support innovation through an interactive process, the key issue is to involve individuals and organizations (WB, 2006). Among

² This definition considers different kinds of research as basic, applied and multidisciplinary, etc.

³ It is important to remember that besides research activities other remarkable mission of a university is education and extension.

other examples of this institutional effort, we highlight that the UNAL-policy makers asked to the academic community about the main topic to be considered. In that way, researchers from the community defined 13 TRA and six agendas were published in 2012.

TRA building process considered three stages i) the preliminary phase in which were built several inputs ii) the second phase Called "Foresight phase" in which were defined the foreseen timeframe based on previous inputs also the academic community was invited to participate through different alternatives and, iii) the final stage in which was proposed a preliminary version for an institutional think tank.

In the early stage, to build each agenda were invited almost 10 researchers coming from different institutional branches. If we look at it more closely each agenda also had a mediation team with a methodological guide, but also two lookout people. And all decisions were taken in a cooperation process, which according to Molina et al (2012) involves almost 200 meetings to define twelve agendas.

1.3. Improving innovation governance

The objective of each TRA was planning institutional research priorities in different knowledge areas. We had identified was at least three ways for improvement of the institutional innovation governance. First, TRA were developed to improve the planning process, and to establish research priorities. In this point is notable that some TRA went further and defined a financial plan for the projects proposed, an example of that provision are the Energy and Biotechnology agendas.

Second, a TRA was defined using a strong methodological process considering foresight and competitive intelligence tools as main study components. International research trends, Institutional research capabilities and governmental priorities were important inputs considered in the first stage of the methodological process.

Third, UNAL ratifies the main position in the NIS as a result of TRA, because their national scope with an institutional approach. It means that TRA were developed for all the country however were focused and developed mainly for the regions where UNAL has branches considering a regional perspective according to the government policies that emphasizes in the egalitarian regional development.

Regards to the actors behavior is clear that the players involved in the TRA were mainly institutional researchers. That point is remarkable in two perspectives; first, UNAL could recognize the human capital in each TRA.

Second, a TRA was defined in a participatory initiative in that context each individual researcher could identify partners with whom they can achievement of strategic growth goals proposed in the foresight phase as a new framework.

Finally, we remark some missing elements in agendas, for example they omit the market demand from the consumer outlook, according to the Commission of the European Communities (2006) include their perspective could be consider as a modernization that could lead the change.

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