




The Universidad of Zulia Insertion in Higher Education Internationalization Process

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ABSTRACT

The University of Zulia (LUZ) is an autonomous institution, created in 1891. The university was closed by the national government in 1904, and it reopened in 1946. Since then, the university has been subject to the political country conditions: dictatorship/democracy/current revolution. The internationalization of higher education was not an issue of importance along most of the 20th century, in Venezuela, as in most of the Latin America countries. However, the universities established agreements with institutions from different countries, especially the United States and Europe. The academic mobility of professors and students was also oriented to these countries, as well as to some Latin American such as Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, considered more developed. The University of Zulia was part of that process. Currently, the political conditions impose new challenges on university internationalization. The data obtained at the Universidad of Zulia and its institutional documents, point out some relevant facts: the University tries to keep many active agreements with other institutions; there is no clear idea of internationalization and its role in the development of the institution; the University of Zulia is making internationalization a way to obtain financing through international students.

KEYWORDS

Higher education. Internationalization. University of Zulia. Venezuela

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La Inserción de la Universidad del Zulia en el Proceso de Internacionalización de la Educación Superior

RESUMEN

La Universidad del Zulia (LUZ) es una institución autónoma, creada en 1891. En 1904, la Universidad fue clausurada por el gobierno nacional y reabierta nuevamente en 1946. Desde entonces, ha estado sujeta al devenir político del país: dictadura/democracia/actual 'revolución'. Como en el resto de los países de América Latina, la internacionalización de la educación superior en Venezuela no fue un tema de importancia durante la mayor parte del siglo XX, aunque las universidades establecieron acuerdos con instituciones en otras partes del mundo, especialmente de los Estados Unidos y Europa, hacia donde también se orientó la movilidad académica de profesores y estudiantes. Así como hacia otros países de América Latina considerados como más desarrollados, como México, Argentina y Brasil. La Universidad del Zulia fue parte de ese proceso. Actualmente, las condiciones políticas del llamado 'socialismo del siglo XXI' imponen nuevos retos a las universidades en términos de la internacionalización. A la luz de la realidad socio-política del país, la revisión de los datos obtenidos en la Universidad del Zulia y de los documentos institucionales apuntan hacia algunos hechos relevantes: no hay una idea clara de la internacionalización y su rol en el desarrollo de la institución; la Universidad trata de mantener activos muchos de los acuerdos con otras instituciones; ante la precariedad del presupuesto asignado por el gobierno, la Universidad del Zulia está haciendo de la internacionalización una manera de obtener financiamiento a través de los estudiantes internacionales que escogen la universidad para realizar sus estudios de posgrado.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Educación Superior. Internacionalización. Universidad del Zulia. Venezuela.

A Inserção da Universidade de Zulia no Processo de Internacionalização do Ensino Superior

RESUMO

A Universidade de Zulia (LUZ) é uma instituição autônoma criada em 1891. Em 1904, a Universidade foi fechada pelo governo nacional e reabriu novamente em 1946. Desde então, tem sido assunto para o futuro político do país: ditadura / democracia / corrente "revolução". Como em outros países latino-americanos, a internacionalização do ensino superior na Venezuela não era um grande problema para a maior parte do século XX, embora as universidades estabeleceu acordos com as instituições em outras partes do mundo, especialmente os Estados Unidos e Europa, onde a mobilidade acadêmica de professores e alunos também foi orientada. Assim como outros países latino-americanos considerados mais desenvolvidos, como México, Argentina e Brasil. A Universidade de Zulia fazia parte desse processo. Atualmente, as condições políticas chamado "socialismo do século XXI" colocam novos desafios para as universidades em termos de internacionalização. À luz da realidade sócio-política do país, a revisão dos dados obtidos na Universidade de Zulia e os documentos institucionais apontam para alguns fatos relevantes: não há uma idéia clara de internacionalização e seu papel no desenvolvimento do país. instituição; a Universidade tenta manter ativos muitos dos acordos com outras instituições; dada a precariedade do orçamento atribuído pelo governo, a Universidade de Zulia está fazendo da internacionalização uma maneira de obter financiamento através de estudantes internacionais que escolhem a universidade para realizar seus estudos de pós-graduação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Ensino superior. Internacionalização Universidade de Zulia. Venezuela.

Introduction

The *Grupo Internacional de Estudos e Pesquisa sobre Educação Superior (GIEPES)* proposed to carry out the research project on the internationalization of higher education, with the participation of nine countries¹. The objective of the project was to analyze the development of this process in different universities of the countries involved, starting from the description of their characteristics, implemented strategies, organizational structures destined to carry out the internationalization in the institutions and the scope that the process has had.

In this article we present the case of the University of Zulia (Venezuela), taking into account the historical evolution of the factors that define the internationalization of higher education, regardless of whether or not the concept as such has been part of institutional policies throughout its existence.

The first section of the article describes the most important aspects of the history of the University of Zulia (LUZ), from its creation until today, emphasizing the dynamics of its relationship with the State, as a public institution, and the different Venezuelan governments that have marked higher education policies in the country, given the relevance that this has for the development and functioning of the institution.

In the second part, there is a historical description of the internationalization process in LUZ, highlighting the most important features that have characterized this process in the institution, from its reopening in 1946, until the first two decades of this century; in the next section, we highlight the elements that identify the internationalization of the University, in a context of crisis, by the imposition of socialism in the XXI century and the social, political and economic consequences that impact on the functioning of the institution.

The history of the University and the description of the factors that point towards the implementation of the process of internationalization of the institution, lead to the last part of the article, which analyzes what has been the implicit or explicit conception of internationalization at the University of Zulia.

A Brief History of Luz: Creation And Closure (1891-1904) and Reopening (1946); Dictatorship/Democracy; Revolution

The War of Independence (1810-1823) left Venezuela dismembered in its territory, with a precarious economy that only achieved short recovery periods and a weak and unstable central State. However, the state of Zulia, geographically distant from the capital (Caracas), was characterized, to some extent, by a more stable economy, based on agro-export and trade. That gave rise to the presence of an enlightened economic and political elite, which insisted

¹ Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Spain, Mexico, Portugal, Uruguay and Venezuela

for several years before the central government, to establish in the city an institution of higher studies. Finally, it materialized with the approval of the Federal College, origin of the University of Zulia (LUZ), created in the last decade of a century that was characterized by a strong economic, political and social instability in Venezuela.

The first cycle of the University only lasted 13 years, since the national government considered that the existence of this institution was not necessary for the training of professionals, which required the economic development of the country, according to the criteria of who was at the time Minister of Public Instruction. Consequently, by order of the President of the Republic, the closure of the University was ordered in 1904. On the other hand, the precarious economic and infrastructure conditions and scarce recognition on the part of the national government had already limited the possibilities of development and consolidation of the institution.

LUZ remained closed for 42 years, during which time students from the region had to go to Caracas or Merida for their university studies.

In 1945, despite having obtained power by force, a group of military and civilians began a period in which the germ of democracy was found in Venezuela. The Revolutionary Junta that presided over the national government decreed the reopening of the University of Zulia in 1946.

The reopening of this institution also responded to the educational ideas advanced by the main ideologists and most influential civic and political leaders of the period, whose government program was based on modernizing humanism, which attributed to the State the central role in educational matters². This opened for the University of Zulia a period of growth and consolidation of its presence in the region and in the country. Three faculties, Medicine, Engineering and Law, with an enrollment of 170 students, marked the beginning of this new stage (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2017a).

A significant feature that should be highlighted in this period was the incorporation of university autonomy, which was an important turning point for higher education institutions in Venezuela, even if such autonomy was limited, as the authorities would continue to be appointed by the central government (NARVAEZ BELLO, 2011).

The legal framework governing higher education remained more or less unchanged until 1958. The democratic period that began in 1945 culminated in 1948. The following years were of military dictatorship and, until the restoration of democracy, from the formal point of view, there were no major changes for Venezuelan universities.

The intervention of the executive power in the institutions was maintained to a greater or lesser degree, both in the appointment and removal of their authorities, as well as in the

² However, that State role had already been included in the Law of Education of 1940 promoted by the government, whose main ideologue was the well-known Venezuelan writer and intellectual, Arturo Usler Prieti

repression of the movements that from within the universities were fighting for the recovery of democracy in the country.

However, from the academic point of view, Venezuelan universities, to the extent that political conditions allowed, gradually consolidated their participation into the country's modernization process begun in the 1940s, especially due to the economic impulse offered by high oil revenues. This period (1946-1958) ends for LUZ with an enrollment of 823 students and 393 graduates, which meant an enrollment growth of more than 70%, as well as an increase in the proportion of graduates, higher than 100% in 1958 with respect to 1946 (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2017a).

An important contribution during the period (1946-1958) was the presence of immigrants' professionals³ trained abroad. An emblematic case is that of Efrain Barberii, a Venezuelan petroleum engineer, trained and resident in the United States and creator of the Petroleum School of the University of Zulia (1952), at the request of the university authorities (RODRÍGUEZ OLMEDILLO, PÁEZ CARRASQUEÑO Y GONZÁLEZ, 2007). The creation of this School was the response of LUZ to the development and consolidation of the oil industry, in one of the most important regions for the production of this mineral.

In 1958, a new democratic period began in the country. An important milestone for the Venezuelan universities was the approval of the Law of Universities (1958), which preserved university autonomy, with which the process initiated in Cordoba in 1918 became a reality in the country, a turning point in the modernizing project of the Latin American university, and its impact on research and academic freedom (PARRA-SANDOVAL, 2010).

From the academic point of view, the beginning and consolidation of the democratic period (1958-1998) can be summarized⁴ in two major stages.

The first stage between 1958 and the end of 1980s, characterized by a dynamic that largely responded to the modernizing and democratic political project. The Venezuelan university and, specifically the University of Zulia, were first-rate actors in the expansion of enrollment⁵, in the process of institutional diversification and growth of the disciplinary areas offered⁶ and, in the consolidation of higher education as a mechanism for social promotion and consolidation of the middle classes.

³ From the first half of the 20th century until the 1970s, Venezuela was a country of immigration (VEGA, 2003). In this migratory movement, it was important the presence of scientists who found in the Venezuelan universities the adequate space for their professional development.

⁴ Summarizing in a few lines a complex process of significant duration carries with it the risk of not considering some important aspects. Here we wanted only to highlight what is central to our objective of making a general outline of the history of LUZ, as a frame of reference for its insertion in the process of internationalization of higher education.

⁵ In the period 1972-1976, the enrollment of the University of Zulia almost quintupled in relation to the period 1969-1972, going from 7,623 to 34,467 students (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2017a). This exponential growth in the number of students meant that in 1980 LUZ had the highest student enrollment in the country: 22.5% of the national university population (LUZWEB, 2013).

⁶ With the creation of new institutions and faculties and research institutes in the existing ones.

For almost three decades, Venezuelan universities, and particularly LUZ, were coherent with the political project of the national and local elite to democratize higher education and to guarantee social mobility. Besides the professionalization consolidated the urban middle classes, a mechanism that made possible the distribution of oil revenues, without counting on the perverse effects that would be felt in the following decade (PARRA-SANDOVAL, 2011).

During the first phase of the democratic period, the Venezuelan university and LUZ on a regional scale occupied a central place in the academic, political and economic life of the communities in which they are inserted. The University of Zulia experienced what it could be considered its “golden period” in the region, in the dynamics of its relationship with the State. However, the exponential expansion of student enrollment, the economic and financial crises, which was already beginning to unfold, and the emergence of new institutions, some private but also official, eroded its role as a State Building University (SBU) (ORDORIKA, 2013), both nationally and locally.

The other great stage was between the end of the 80s and 1998. In 1983, the deep economic crises that already begun to be predicted since the end of the previous decade became evident in Venezuela. As has happened over the years, since oil operation began, the Venezuelan economy and society have been deeply linked to the volatility of the oil market. The oil shock that occurred towards the end of the 1970s caused tax revenues from the oil industry to be systematically reduced (SANCHEZ, BAENA AND ESQUEDA, 2000). This had a negative impact on the budget allocated to universities, while they continued to grow in enrollment and diversification, and at the same time demanded that national government allocated them a “fair” budget (LUZWEB, 2013).

Thus, the University of Zulia culminated the 80s with an enrollment of more than 50,000 students (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2017a); at the same time, it launched new graduated programs (specialties and masters) and a program for the expansion of physical space (LUZWEB, 2013). This growth in enrollment, diversification of the academic offer and the physical space coincided with the weakening in the relationship with the State, not only as the unique source of funding but also due to the loss of legitimacy of the Venezuelan university as a forger of the State, at the national and local levels.

The 90s were characterized by the implosion of the country’s social, economic and political crisis. Democratic stability was questioned and, unlike was happening in most Latin American countries, in Venezuela, new forms of populism were implemented by the central government (PARRA-SANDOVAL, 2010) which on the one hand, prevented the neo-liberal measures introduced in many of Latin American’s higher education systems, but at the same time limited the possibility of introducing the necessary reforms in Venezuelan universities, demanded by broad academic sectors.

The economic crisis not only had a general impact on the allocation of university budgets. The cuts had an impact on the salaries of academics, which led the professors’ union to press for compensatory measures. Among these measures, the national government created

the Program for the Promotion of Researchers (PPR), which provided a complement to the researcher, according to the number of “research products”, evaluated through international standards. Although this did not entail “...in turn processes of institutional evaluation and improvement and consolidation of the capacity of research groups, centers and institutes” (PARRA-SANDOVAL, 2010: 115), it had an important impact on LUZ, to the extent that, by the year 2000, nineteen journals published in the institution were nationally accredited and 328 University researchers were recognized by the PPR (LUZWEB, 2013). That same year (2000), the enrollment was 44,183 students (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2017a).

In 1999, a new political stage began in Venezuela, whose main motto, in principle, was the restructuring and re-foundation of the country; from 2006, the objective has been the construction of a socialist society, through a process catalogued as “revolutionary” that has set the tone in the dynamics of the relationship between the State and the Venezuelan university.

It is a complex task to try to summarize in a few lines that what have been for the last twenty years of a period characterized by profound political, social and economic changes and their repercussion in the Venezuelan university and, in particular, in LUZ.

In a very rough manner, and having as criteria only the death of President Chavez, it is possible to identify two stages. From 1999, when he begins his period, until 2013, when his death occurs. And a second period from 2013 to 2018⁷.

However, there is a common denominator to the two stages. The principles of equity, relevance and higher education as public good have been present in both; the difference has been mainly in the degree of the radicalization in the imposition of high ideological content, in the policies implemented and in the strategies and actions to which they lead (PARRA-SANDOVAL, 2016).

During the period 1999-2012, higher education policies, responding to the above principles, were expressed among others, in an increase in the number of students, which in the case of LUZ became evident in an enrollment higher than approximately two thirds in 2012, compared to that of 2000⁸. Such growth occurred because of the elimination of any student selection tests by universities and the government’s control over its distribution and allocation among the different institutions, including those that maintain their autonomous status, although the Venezuelan government increasingly violates this principle of university autonomy.

On the other hand, in 2007 President Chavez and the National Assembly called for a referendum to reform the 1999 National Constitution and declare Venezuela a socialist republic; although the result was negative and such a reform was not approved by the

⁷ It is necessary to insist once again that it is difficult to summarize in a few paragraphs, a process as complex as the one that has taken place in the country since 1999, without omissions; however, as we pointed out in relation to the so-called democratic period, here we will highlight the most significant facts, in terms of the objective of the article.

⁸ In 2000, LUZ reported an enrollment of 44,813 students, which increases in 2012 to 66,864.

majority of the population, the national government took all the necessary measures to implement it and impose in practice the confirmation of that aforementioned socialist republic. To this goal, the national government decreed the ‘Simon Bolivar National Project, First Socialist Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Nation 2007-2013’ (GOBIERNO BOLIVARIANO DE VENEZUELA, 2007).

This Plan became the basic document for the design and implementation of public policies. In the area of higher education, this was clearly expressed on the formulation of the Mission and Vision of which from then would begin to be called the Ministry of People’s Power for University Education, destined to be the organ of the socialist State and strategic factor in the construction of the socialist society (MINISTERIO DEL PODER POPULAR PARA LA EDUCACION UNIVERSITARIA, 2008). For LUZ, this meant adapting, at least in terms of rhetoric, its policies and development plans to the socialist project⁹.

This has stimulated a climate of mutual mistrust between the autonomous universities and the national government and has influenced the precariousness of budget allocations and the implementation of measures by the national government, which in one way or another limit the exercise of autonomy supported in the 1999 National Constitution.

With the death of President Chavez and the election of President Maduro, a period from 2013 to the present begins, in which the tendency, already drawn in the previous stage, of authoritarianism and ideological imposition by the national government on autonomous universities, has deepened. Such situation has originated extreme conditions for the institution, which have led the University of Zulia to declare through its higher instance of collegiate government, the University Council, to be in the middle of material crisis, of infrastructure, of services and possibilities to offer a quality education

due to the forced migration of human talent, the high deterioration of the infrastructure, the obsolescence of the technological platform and the difficulty in acquiring essential inputs for the development of the core functions: teaching, research and extension. (LUZWEB, 2018).

In short, the development and consolidation of the University of Zulia, from the moment of its creation until now, has been deeply linked to the political process of the country. As a higher education institution, its creation depended on the decision of the central government; during its existence, both as an autonomous institution and as institution lacking autonomy, it has depended mainly on public funding for its maintenance.

However, a lack of financial autonomy had not been a condition until now that granted the State the power to intervene directly in its academic functions, except during periods of dictatorships, in which government interference was mainly in the appointment of its

⁹ In 2010, in the Ministry of People’s Power for University Education annual report, LUZ declares as its Strategic Objective for the New Stage: “To advance in the confirmation of the new socialist structure” (GOBIERNO BOLIVARIANO DE VENEZUELA. MINISTERIO DEL PODER POPULAR PARA LA EDUCACION UNIVERSITARIA, 2011) which it is perceived to be that of a socialist society, as imposed by the National Plan.

authorities. Today this situation has changed and LUZ, like all the autonomous universities, is being subjected to a treatment by the national government that has led it to declare a humanitarian emergency and to demand “the cessation of government attacks against academic freedom and university autonomy”. (LUZWEB, 2018).

Historical Description of the Internationalization Process of the University of Zulia

Studies on migratory movements in Latin America indicate that Venezuela’s characteristic in this process was as a receiving country for qualified immigrants (professionals and academics), especially during the boom in oil operation in the mid-20th century. This trait of receiving country was also maintained during the 70s when the political and economic instability in the Southern Cone nations forced the displacement of scientists and academics from those countries, who found in Venezuela a socio-economic and political environment favourable to their personal and professional development (VEGA, 2003).

During the 40s and 50s, Venezuela financed studies abroad (the United States, Canada and the Panama Canal and Europe) to a group of Venezuelans, as a strategy linked to agricultural development, public health research and security and development of the oil industry. However, the important load of this funding fell to the national government through its ministries and some private organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and Creole Petroleum Corporation (FELD, CASAS, SONSIRE LOPEZ, AND VESSURI, 2013).

In this sense, the universities benefited from the reception of professionals and academics, trained in different parts of Europe, the United States and some South American countries, who, attracted by the favorable social, political and economic conditions of the country, joined the Venezuelan universities by personal initiative, probably also motivated by the opportunity that the practice of teaching, training new professionals, offered for the development of their professionals and intellectual capacities. At the same time, the institutions were strengthened in terms of their academic personnel.

The oil boom of the first decades of the 20th century, and even up to the end of the 80s, allowed universities and the central government to finance the mobilization of the Venezuelan professors and students to carry out undergraduate and graduate studies abroad. Some of these exchanges took place within the framework of agreements established with universities abroad.

In the case of the University of Zulia, although there are no official figures, or at least they are unknown, on the number of professors or students who were granted scholarships during those years to study abroad, a plausible hypothesis is that, like what is reported for the case of the Universidad de Los Andes (ULA), towards the end of the 70s and the early 80s, LUZ “...reached the top in terms of scholarships granted to professors, mostly to study abroad and began to decrease its number at that time.” (RUIZ CALDERÓN, 2015: 29). A consequence of the economic crisis caused by the devaluation of the national currency.

As has been pointed out, the decade of the 90s was the prelude to a stage that formally began in 1999. The University of Zulia, like the rest of universities in the country, was forced to restrict the granting of scholarships for graduate studies abroad¹⁰, during the last decade of the twenty century, due to the economic crisis, which had its turning point in 1983, with the devaluation of the currency and the consequent inflationary process triggered since then. This accentuated the budgetary crisis historically denounced by the University since the 70s.

Faced with these facts, the University needed to reorient its strategies, for which programs were designed and actions were carried out to strengthen the institution and project it internationally through alliances with higher education institutions abroad "...with similar capacities and interests, which combined would allow to solve and strength its internal structures." (ROMERO GONZALEZ, 2009: 1165). These strategies led to the formalization of agreements oriented towards the development of research projects, academic mobility and networks integration, with universities of Spain, Germany, France, Italy, Cuba, Mexico and Argentina (ROMERO GONZALEZ, 2009).

Among these agreements, it is important to highlight -because its positive results- that of academic and pedagogical cooperation between the University of Zulia and the *Université de Caen* (Basse-Normandie, France), signed in 1989. Its main objective was of creating in the University of Zulia a Research Centre like the *Centre de Recherche sur le Travail Social* of the *Université de Caen* and to design a Master 'degree, following the model of the "*Maîtrise de Sciences et Techniques: Intervention Sociale et Développement*" from the same University. This materialized in the design and implementation of the Master's Degree in Social Work at the University of Zulia. In the creation and operation of these programs and within the framework of the agreement, the exchange of professors and students from both institutions played an important role.

Another international agreement reached in LUZ in the 90s was the one that brought together European and South American universities through the Latin American Training Program (ALFA) in 1995-1996, to carry out the tutelage of master's degree works and doctoral theses¹¹.

On the other hand, LUZ participates in the INTERCAMPUS Cooperation Program (Collaboration Agreement with Spanish and Latin America Universities) since 1996.

In the 90s, the country's economic and social-political crisis worsened and this, in turn, implied a deepening of the economic crisis in universities and the need to implement budget cuts, which limited the possibilities of financing for mobility and institutional support, in the agreements established in previous periods. Thus, at the end of the 90s, an important element to take into account in the validity of the international links of the University of Zulia, are the personal relations and contacts established through some agreements by the researchers and academics of the international institutions involved, with those of LUZ.

¹⁰ A positive effect of this crisis was the growth of graduate studies in the country.

¹¹ For Europe, universities from France, Sweden and Greece participated, and from South America: Venezuela (LUZ) and Argentina.

However, programs such as INTERCAMPUS, the Academic Exchange and Mobility Program of the Organization of Ibero-American States (PIMA-OEI), ERASMUS and alliances established with international organizations such as the OAS, the Latin America Integration Association (ALADI) and with embassies of different Latin America and European countries and of the United States and Canada, were strategies that remained active, despite the limitations that have marked the two decades of the 21st century.

The current state of internationalization in LUZ

The impact and importance attributed to the international rankings of higher education institutions have been growing in the world university sphere, since the beginning of the 21st century. Factors such as the demand for social accountability, the importance of research in the knowledge society, the emphasis on measurable results of teaching and research processes as a funding mechanism, and competition between countries and their higher education institutions for public recognition have modified university practice in recent years. This has led, among other things, to the “bureaucratization of the internationalization of universities”, insofar as some of its dimensions are emphasized, to the detriment of all its essential elements, by reducing the process “...gradually to a pragmatic definition of transboundary movements of students, programs and institutions...” (VESSURI, 2014:17).

Another important factor to understand the characteristics of the internationalization process in LUZ is that, in addition to the fact that the bureaucratization of this process has also been evident in the institution, the Venezuelan crisis that erupted in 1983, deepened exponentially in the last decades, and has influenced the regular functioning of LUZ. Thus, the gravity of the situation has even led to the University Council to declare in 2018 that the institution is in a “complex humanitarian emergency”. It is not only a question of the precarious internal situation that does not allow it to function but also of the impact of the crisis on the living conditions of professors, employees and students (LUZWEB, 2018).

Given this reality, the University of Zulia assumes the efforts to remain active. Hence, related to international links, the process has been reduced to maintain the validity of 52 international agreements¹², basically oriented toward the mobility of students and teachers, who, by personal decision, individually incur expenses not covered by the foreign institutions, either which receive Venezuelans or which sends students and professors to the University of Zulia.

The entrance of foreign students to the University is regulated. For those who come from the majority of Latin American and the Caribbean countries, through the Latin American and the Caribbean Agreement which allows the validation of studies, titles and

¹² Although LUZ’s web portal registers these international Conventions (52), their validity cannot be verified in all cases, while in the sites of some of these institutions their existence is not recorded. We can assume that they have indeed been established in the past, but that, under the conditions of the country, LUZ has not been able to meet the commitments set out in some of them.

diplomas of higher education in the region (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2017b) and the Andres Bello Agreement¹³ (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2017c).

Thus, although LUZ lacks an expressly formulated internationalization policy –and, consequently, its funding- some institutional cooperation agreements are currently in force, which include academic mobility programs, as well as the offer of master and doctoral degrees.

Among these, we must highlight those established with the Universidad Mayor de Chile, as well as with universities in Colombia¹⁴, in which emphasis is placed in the mobility of students and professors; those signed with the Republic of Ecuador for the delivery of masters and doctorates in different institutions, both public and private¹⁵, and student exchange, besides the agreement signed with Spain universities for joint doctorates¹⁶.

These agreements do not address, nor do they contemplate, an express policy of attracting foreign researchers and professors, with the aim of incorporating them as academic staff of the University of Zulia.

Members of the academic community of the Universidad of Zulia, by personal initiative, make use of the opportunities offered through agreements with different institutions (foundations and universities) for short stays, such as: Macro University Network, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Carolina Foundation, ERASMUS, Fulbright, Global Undergraduate Exchange (Global UGRAD), World Future Society (Sectional Venezuela), International Cooperation Agency of Chile, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, Horizontal Cooperation Agency of Chile.

In 1992, the University of Zulia created the Office of Inter-Institutional Relations, an organization in charge of promoting and strengthening the search for and fulfillment of partnership and cooperation agreements between the university and other institutions, including the internationalization process.

In 2001, the University Council of LUZ approved the Plan for the Transformation of the Office of Inter-Institutional Relations (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2001) which included among its proposals “to promote in a context of international activity, the product of the functions of research, teaching and production, developed at the University of Zulia.” To this end, the Plan proposed academic exchange, aimed at strengthening and maintaining international mobility programs; the development of a portfolio of academic and scientific

¹³ This Agreement also contemplates the recognition of primary or general basic education and of the secondary or middle education carried out by citizens coming from the signatory countries from Latin America and Spain.

¹⁴ Universidad Luis Amigó, Universidad de La Guajira, Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander.

¹⁵ Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí, Universidad Técnica de Machala, Universidad de Guayaquil (public universities), Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, Universidad Iberoamericana del Ecuador and Polo de Capacitación, Investigación y Publicación (privates universities).

¹⁶ Spain universities are Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, Universidad de Córdoba and Universidad de Málaga. The four institutions offer 17 joint doctoral programs in different areas. The degrees are awarded by the Spaniard university and LUZ provides a tutor for each student attending the program.

services of LUZ, of international significance and value; and the creation of a tourism services unit, with the aim of organizing, promoting and managing academic tourism and an 'international house'¹⁷ (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2001¹⁸).

One of the objectives of this Office is to expand the University's relations with the international environment in order to create and disseminate knowledge, solve problems and anticipate changes and serve society. The following strategic guidelines are formulated: to manage, through international organisms, the accreditation processes for faculties and campus of the University of Zulia; structure a database of the different international organizations, to manage possible strategic alliances in areas of interest and propose relationship mechanisms through the management of these alliances, between LUZ and the countries of the South, with particular emphasis on the promotion of strategic alliances with international organizations, such as the Organization of American States, the European Community, the South American Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA); for which the Office assumes only an intermediary role between the entities involved and, also, as adviser for the institution.

From the revision of the agreements, it can be extracted as the most outstanding characteristic that the greater load is given to the mobility of students and, especially, to that of graduate studies, as an indicator of the internationalization of the institution.

This reference can be verified from the declaration of the graduate policies of LUZ, which point out that, among them, there are those of support the graduate programs in the national and international ambit, by means of a strategy of cooperation and insertion in networks of research and education of fourth and fifth level and to develop research programs with national and international institutions, in priority areas. Likewise, the Central Coordination of Graduate Studies proposes among its objectives, to promote integrated graduate programs, nationally and internationally, that facilitates reciprocity and transfer of students and professors and to promote the permanent evaluation of graduate programs, with the goal of determining their scientific, technological and social relevance, and to promote their worldwide accreditation (UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA, 2018).

In terms of the specific policies of the different graduate programs offered by the University, there is little or no mention of internationalization in most cases. The few allusion made to this process revolve around the idea the respective graduate program is oriented towards the solution of problems in the international order and that the graduate program is an international reference, due to the quality offered, which would be an important indicator for its international accreditation.

¹⁷ To receive academics and students from the mobility programs.

¹⁸ The programs and projects foreseen in the Plan were initiated, but not all of them were concluded, due to the budget deficit, interruption of academic and administrative activities typical of the daily life in which the country was at that time, which in no case are alien to the University, and which still today are maintained with greater gravity.

Finally, this description of the current state of internationalization in LUZ must also take into account another dimension of the internationalization of higher education, which refers to international links among researchers from different countries, beyond the formal agreements established between institutions. In this sense, an empirical reference available at the moment is the one provided by *Scimago*, about the international collaboration reported by LUZ journals in 2017.

Out of the eight journals recorded in this bibliographic database of abstracts and citations of scientific journals articles, only three accounts for about one-third of published articles produced by authors from more than one country; the remaining five reported between 24% and 0% of articles authored by researchers from several countries (*Scimago*, 2018). Thus, although this cannot be the only indicator to look at in relation to this dimension of the internationalization of higher education, it is one of the most relevant insofar as it expresses the extent to which the international authorship of the articles is the most likely result of the impact of the journals on the international scene and of the visibility of the institution's researchers.

Conclusion: The conception of Internationalization in LUZ

The review of the actions carried out by LUZ in the framework of international relations throughout its history allows us to reach several conclusions regarding the characteristics and strategies implemented by the institution, for its insertion in the process of internationalization.

First, academic mobility has been its most visible feature. Either because, when the economic and political conditions allowed it the University encouraged its professors to study abroad, which was possible through the scholarships programs of the institutions or other organizations, for which the academic staff received the necessary endorsement; or because, as has happened in recent decades, when the socio-political context has been unfavourable and has generated a strong impact on the decrease in the financial capacity of the institution, academic mobility, although to a much lesser extent, has been possible through agreements established with foreign institutions (mainly universities).

Since this is a characteristic of the mobility of LUZ academic staff abroad, mobility – in the opposite sense- is also an outstanding feature of the University' insertion in the process of internationalization, in terms of its receiving capacity. LUZ has become an important pole of attraction, for students from some Latin America countries –among them especially Ecuador and Colombia- pressured by their institutions to carry out graduate studies¹⁹. The significantly lower cost of masters and doctorates offered by LUZ and the low expenses incurred by the transfer from their places of origin to Maracaibo (LUZ's main campus) attract students from these countries.

¹⁹ Especially doctorate, for those who are university professors in their countries, as a requirement for their job stability and career advancement.

The reception of foreign students in LUZ –in addition to being a factor of internationalization- could contribute, from the academic point of view, to the development of the different graduates programs offered by that institution. As well as from the financial point of view it is generating important resources that would not only benefit these programs, but also the respective faculties that offer them. However, at the same time, this has produced in the institution and in the community a climate of mistrust regarding the legality of the processes for admission of students to the different graduate programs²⁰, as well as a questioning of the quality offered by the programs given the evident precariousness of the physical and academic conditions that the institution and the country go through.

However, neither such academic mobility nor international agreements in which the exchange of professors, students and administrators have been the ever-present and preponderant element, responds to a policy of insertion of the University of Zulia in the process of internationalization. Not only because this has not been proposed in the agenda of higher education in Venezuela as a substantive element for the achievement of quality in the processes of teaching and research and academic management, but because these strategies implemented by LUZ in the framework of inter-institutional relations do not point to what is considered as the internationalization of higher education, as a process that implies the presence of the international dimension as the axis of the functions of higher education institutions: teaching, research and community services.

On the other hand, the efforts made in LUZ²¹, with the objective of implementing strategies with an international dimension of greater scope, face the obstacle that the policies of the national government, marked by a unique ideological orientation (the socialism of the 21th century), by the deep deficiencies of the budget assigned to the institution and by the actions carried out by the government, against the full exercise of university autonomy, represents at this moment. Nevertheless, through these mobility strategies and the establishment of agreements, the University has managed to occupy small spaces of participation, sign cooperation agreements with international organizations –although many of them remain only in the paper- and achieve some visibility of the results of its research.

The need to incorporate the international dimension into the day-to-day work of the university has been insisted from different instances, both from international organizations such as UNESCO and the International Association of Universities, as well as from the proposals made by numerous researchers in higher education, with a scope that transcends the traditional conception that restricted this process to academic mobility and the signing of agreements between institutions.

In this sense, the University must commit itself to make internationalization a transversal axis of teaching, research and university management; involving all actors (internal to the institution- students, professors, administrative- but also external ones,

²⁰ On several occasions, the local media has reported about that.

²¹ Among which is the creation and functioning of the Office of Inter-institutional Relations of the University of Zulia.

communities, business) in a horizontal relationship, between equals, which contrast the notion of competition, typical of international rankings, with that of cooperation. Thus, from the curriculum of careers to the production of knowledge, it should respond to the challenge of guaranteeing quality and facing the challenges of the contemporary geopolitical order.

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