

## EDITORIAL: THAT WHICH NEVER SHOULD HAVE GONE AWRY

### Comitè Editorial de SVMMA

e-mail: [revistasvmma.ircvm@ub.edu](mailto:revistasvmma.ircvm@ub.edu)

doi: 10.1344/Svmma2016.8.9

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In this editorial we want to express our concern about the effects of the economic crisis in Spanish universities in general and, in particular, in Catalonia; a concern, by the way, shared by most of the university community.

Our view is not based on nostalgia or subjective perceptions. We base our opinion on specific and palpable facts that we helplessly observe in our departments, in classrooms, and in university hallways and cafeterias day after day. It goes without saying that this situation is worse in the case of the Humanities, which seem to have lost their prestige in a society oblivious to the contributions of philologists, philosophers, and historians. These contributions, which everybody deems necessary when they need to feel culturally integrated or to be socially recognized, are considered irrelevant for business, twisted during electoral campaigns and, more often than not, manipulated in order to justify the unjustifiable.

Let us focus on the situation of our universities, and on the most serious errors that endanger an otherwise successful university model. We are going to address just three problems, those that we consider more important and with the greatest impact on the formation of scholars and specialists in all career stages.

First, there is the pressure of soaring university fees. Both undergraduate and master's fees are higher than in other Spanish universities, but also higher than in many European countries. This issue could be solved by implementing a better grant scheme or by evaluating the financial situation of each student to determine their ability to contribute to the cost of their own education. Every now and then someone seems to come up with a solution, but those of us who deal with these problems on a daily basis know that this is not usually the case. We hear the complaints of the students, we are aware of their specific situations, and we have information about the fees at other universities, which leads us to wonder why do they still choose our university.

The second issue we would like to address here is related to the teaching staff: the ageing of scholars and the work conditions of early career researchers. We will not discuss particular cases, but it can be easily verified that, during the last five years, most of the permanent teaching staff have left and then been replaced with academics hired through precarious and fixed-term

contracts. Thus, we end up with young scholars entering into abusive contracts that require them to do almost the same work as permanent staff members do for a quarter of their salary. Thus, new staff members—those who prevent our academic system from falling apart—do not have access to salary supplements, or research grants, and, moreover, there is no clear promotion policy in sight for them. They can spend years and years waiting for an opportunity that never comes. In some universities, these precarious scholars may amount up to 50% of the total teaching staff, which is also roughly the percentage of scholars holding permanent positions five years ago that have since retired or died.

Finally, the last main issue is perhaps the most painful one for any university teacher. We are talking about the constant loss of graduates and doctors trained in our universities who must travel abroad to earn their living. The best of our scientists and humanists move overseas looking for what their country is not able to offer them. Some of them stay, and try very hard to find a job where they can use the skills developed during their education. They have PhD or master's degrees, and language skills. They are part of one of the most highly-trained generations in the history of our country, but, what are we doing with them? We force them to emigrate and generate wealth in other countries. We sincerely doubt our country is in a position to be so 'generous'. Our future depends on the wealth of knowledge and resources these people, the best among us, might generate here. It is an upsetting and annoying situation, particularly when some people boast about the programmes for getting scientists back or claim that they will eventually come back because our weather is much more pleasant than in other countries.

As you can see, the outlook is not very promising, and our authorities do not seem to be aware of the magnitude of the tragedy; or, if they are, they are not willing to do anything about it (that is, beyond empty campaign messages and public announcements in the media).

Well, we will keep on fighting to preserve the levels of research and teaching quality we have reached so far, because we are aware of what is at stake. However, it would also be nice if those responsible for public policies (presidents, secretaries, ministers, and chancellors, among others) took the matter in their hands and set up a sound and realistic plan to straighten that which never should have gone awry.