

Involvement of the University Community in Catalonia's Pro-Independence Political Process

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Abstract

This article analyses the effects of the pro-independence protests in Catalonia (2017–2019) on Catalan universities and their students. The demonstrations had a moderate impact on the Catalan university system. Large numbers of students took part in the protests. Some universities offered students the chance to pass courses with a single final examination, since they had missed some classes.

Political events in Catalonia, particularly those that occurred between 2015 and 2019, also had an impact on universities, in terms of numerous student and faculty uprisings and protests and institutional responses by the universities, as they waded through these unrelenting mobilizations. Some of the first actions to spark these mobilizations took place in the days leading up to the referendum on self-determination of October 1, 2017—which was driven and supported by the government of Catalonia—as a result of police investigations and arrests that sought to squander the vote. The referendum ushered in a period of repression, beginning with police measures on the day of the referendum and the arrest and incarceration of pro-independence activists and government of Catalonia leaders, which would set the process down a judicial path (another group of leaders, including the president, opted to seek asylum in Belgium, Scotland, and Switzerland). The unrest peaked two years later, kindled by the verdict passed by the Spanish supreme court on October 14, 2019, which found the majority of the defendants guilty of sedition and sentenced them to anywhere from nine to 13 years in prison. This ruling triggered a new wave of mass mobilizations, in which Catalan universities and part of their student bodies were involved.

University Involvement

Catalonia boasts some of the most highly ranked universities in terms of academics in all of Southern Europe. The Catalan university system, which comprises roughly 240,000 students and over 18,000 faculty, participated in the activist movements and protests from the very beginning, both at the institutional level and through students and faculty. In October 2012, the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP), formed by the eight public universities in Catalonia and representing 87.5 percent of university students in the region, declared its intention to join the National Pact for the Right to Decide, which backed the popular consultation held on November 9, 2014. On October 3, 2017, two days after the referendum, the universities joined the highly successful general strike called by Catalonia's main trade unions with the support of the universities' student unions. The day the supreme court passed its verdict two years later, ACUP issued a statement signed by all university presidents, in which it reasserted the views that it had expressed on March 24, 2018, including "the profound dismay it felt toward the incarceration of several Catalan leaders and political figures," its "outrage toward the situation in Catalonia," and its "concern for the well-being of those affected by the verdict." The statement issued by ACUP called upon "all political stakeholders to pool their efforts in order to find a solution to the current political conflict; a solution agreed upon a wide majority of Catalan society and to be implemented as quickly as possible." Thus, Catalan universities took an institutional stance in favor of human and individual rights, in line with their multifaceted identity and leveraging their position as moral and academic, rather than political, authorities.

Student Involvement

Despite the universities' institutional stance, they ended up clashing with their student bodies numerous times following the guilty verdict passed on October 14, 2019. In the wake of the ruling, students called a 72-hour strike that would lead to a period of protests, starting with the mass occupation of Barcelona–El Prat Josep Tarradellas Airport,

a protest organized by Tsunami Democràtic. This protest opened the floodgates to a wave of mobilizations, including protests in the streets of Barcelona, a general strike held on October 18, 2019, a barricade at Catalonia's border with France, and a camp set up by students in Barcelona's Plaça Universitat.

Catalan youth and university students played a leading role in these protests and actively participated in the mobilizations orchestrated by various organizations via social media. Several student councils and unions put pressure on the universities' presidents and deans to ease up on student assessment during the period of mobilizations and protests against the ruling, so as not to penalize students for participating. In response to these requests, many universities and university centres acknowledged the exceptional nature of the times and approved measures to ease up on students during the first semester of the 2019–2020 academic year. Nonetheless, only a mere 2,000 students opted to benefit from these measures. At the Autonomous University of Barcelona, for instance, only 1,300 out of 26,000 students chose to take a single final exam at the end of the semester. The impact of these exceptional measures was even weaker at the other universities.

The government of Catalonia's secretariat for universities and research made a few public statements on October 31, 2019, in which it voiced its opinion that "what is exceptional is the political situation, not the protests" held by students, which it saw as a natural part of any process of an activist nature. It also urged university presidents to ensure that quality and academic rigor were being upheld. The mobilizations continued throughout the month of October, garnering a greater or lesser impact at each university.

Impact on the University System

From 2015 to 2019, the university community took a stance either in favor or against Catalonia's self-determination process. However, except for the two critical periods mentioned above (the period around the referendum of October 1, 2017 and the second half of October 2019 in the wake of the supreme court verdict), Catalan universities never ceased to provide normal academic services.

Generally speaking, Catalan universities welcome a significant number of international students, both from Europe and from further abroad. For instance, they welcomed a total of 12,544 foreign students during the 2017–2018 academic year. To date, there is no evidence of any drop in the number of international students or in the total number of students enrolling at Catalan universities. This also applies to the number of congresses and conferences held in Catalonia, and to research performance in terms of participation in competitive research projects and academic publications. Therefore, we can neither confirm nor disprove whether the political process had a relevant impact on the Catalan university system. We can, however, confirm that both at the institutional level and on the part of students and faculty, there has been clear support of individual and collective rights, as one can only expect from academic institutions. Students and faculty have understandably shown different levels of involvement. In the face of a complex political situation, Catalan universities have striven to position themselves as academic and moral authorities, encouraging free thought and leveraging their institutional position to foster a commitment to negotiation as the best means for finding a solution to the Catalan conflict. ▲

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