



# **An Institution and a Leader**

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## The Institution

Since its original inception on October 15th 1867 as University Board of Guayas, and its renewed initiation as University of Guayaquil in 1883, this institution has been the most well-regarded higher education center in Ecuador, attended by men and women who have contributed positively to build the country.

Nonetheless, the decision to do away with entry exam requirements -without an adequate transition period to adapt the university structures and the academic curricula and pedagogical offer to the new situation - with an ensuing 300% increase in the number of students, marked the beginning of a decline which was further compounded by the political maneuvering and the internal fragmentation of the institution. This became apparent in frequent outbreaks of violence.

According to a preliminary diagnose established before the "Proposal for an Organizational Design":

*"In its recent past, due to an array of factors, the University of Guayaquil has experienced a deterioration of its institutional components, including attendance (a surprising fact since it is a higher education center almost free of charge or with tuition fees by far below market prices). This calls for decisions and mechanisms to counteract negative elements, such as a university policy conducted afar from the specific interests of the country and geared towards partisan or vested interests of small groups or individuals; excessive administrative bureaucracy and centralism, with university matters being managed according to circumstantial conveniences or sectarian behavior; lack of foresight in establishing limits and responsibilities in managerial issues, which contributed to aggravate cultural misconceptions such as lack of discipline and organization, amongst other problems."*

This scenario leads to a permanent state of confrontation between different groups within the institution. The University often had to temporarily cease its activities, saw the dwindling number of its students and the dilapidation of its facilities, started lagging behind in academic excellence and suffered from institutional isolation; in sum, it completely lost its prestige.

The purpose of this paper is not to analyze in further detail the reasons and responsibilities for such a situation, but this introduction is necessary to visualize that only a leader capable of bridging understanding between all parties could refurbish the image of a university where nearly 60,000 people come every day - 49,496 of them students - and help it regain the status of an institution worthy of social support and capable of achieving its corporate goals.

The occasion rose in October 1994, when the University elected León Roldós Aguilera as its Vice-chancellor.

## The Leader

León Roldos was born on July 21st, 1942, the youngest of four children. His mother died at childbirth and, together with his elder brothers, he was raised by an aunt who was later to become his stepmother, though he always called her 'mother' and remained deeply attached to her.

His father served in several political posts before he joined the Ecuadorian diplomatic corps:

*"In our childhood we traveled often to Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, since my father was entrusted with consular responsibilities and thus, at the beginning, we didn't have any specific formal education".*

Back in Ecuador, León successfully attended second and third grades of grammar school at the Cristobal Colón Salesian High School. When the family experienced economic difficulties, he attended fourth grade at Fiscal School N° 13, and fifth and sixth grades at the Orellana Neighborhood School, where he lived. The principal was a renowned teacher in Guayaquil, Eleodoro Barroso. With him, he completed both grades in one year.

He has but pleasant memories from professor Barroso's school. Although there were many troublesome and lazy students, he was not one of them. He says it was, nonetheless, nice to share together a period of life. The most important feature of this time, however, was the transition from private to state school.

*"It was neither good nor bad, but certainly had a profound impact, even though in those days differences were not as marked, they existed all the same. That shocked me but helped me understand that reality has many faces".*

Due to the family's financial crisis, his father temporarily returned to Buenos Aires where he had unfinished business. His absence changed the lifestyle of the Roldós children who, with a working mother, had to take up responsibility for certain chores from an early age. León had to buy the food and became familiar with some of the stallholders and shopkeepers, helping them as a hobby with their homework.

*"It all enriched my existence and I believe that is my main heritage: to know that all human beings need at some point someone to make up space for them and that no human being deserves to be abused".*

After grammar school at professor Barroso's, he joined his brothers in Vicente Rocafuerte High School and later on at University of Guayaquil. As the greatest influences in shaping his childhood and youth he mentions his mother, who upheld family discipline as a paramount value -and which he was constantly to practice along his life - and his father's role as cultural and intellectual mentor, from whom all the children inherited their interest in teaching, a profession which Leon Roldós has exercised for forty years.

While attending Vicente Rocafuerte High School, he met José Solís Castro, a young leftist who owned a bookstore and offered him a job as bookseller. He enthusiastically and successfully embraced the opportunity, so much so that in no time he started selling books for other bookstores as well.

*"It was a great experience. It got me used to several things: to quickly read through books, they significantly enriched my general culture. It also allowed me to meet some important public figures who were my clients and with whom I developed very good relationships".*

Soon he became Solís' partner in the books import business and everything went well until the 1963 military dictatorship seized Solís warehouse and they lost capital. That put an end to his book salesman days.

He was a good university student and at that time he met some of the teachers who were later to offer him job opportunities. The first one came from Otto Quintero, who called him upon his election as Major of Guayaquil to work in municipal education, marking thus the beginning of his pedagogical career and community social service, now from Town Hall. From there he directed afterwards the Community Development Project and served as Municipal Secretary during the administration Assad Bucaram.

He recalls important figures from those days who influenced both his professional training and his personal life. Enrique Palma Alvarado, whose friendship he nurtured since the book selling days and who managed all education matters in the Philanthropic Society and the Artisans Guild.

*"He opened up so many spaces for me in education with a social focus". Carlos H. Vargas, a political figure of the Province of Bolívar, "He trained me as a school supervisor, trusted in me, and even allowed me to join an Educational Reform Commission". And Assad Bucaram, "He is undoubtedly my master in politics, I worked with him for four years and learned the inconceivable: to use a bit of humor to face contradictions and difficult moments, to resort to anecdotes and to propose solutions off the beaten track. A lot of what I learned from him has been useful to me in my work at the University".*

At the same time, he had started cutting his law teeth at Raul Clemente Huerta's practice. He was one of the best lawyers in the country and a leading political figure. "Huerta is a very important chapter in my life; his influence was significant, particularly in law matters". It was Huerta's recommendation which led him to the Banks Supervisory Agency when he left Town Hall in 1969. His colleagues at the Agency volunteered his name to act as hired counsel during the winding-up process of the Bank of Guayaquil. Nonetheless, the Bank reopened and its manager, Cesar Durán Ballén, invited him to work as legal counsel, a task which he shared with René García Llaguno, the bank's general attorney. This marked the beginning of a rather successful career in banking, where he was later on appointed attorney of the Bank of Guayaquil and helped to set up several financial companies. He moved on to work as a lawyer for COFIEC (Ecuadorian Financial Corporation).

*"I owe a significant national and international experience to Cesar Durán Ballén. Since he has offered me a vast array of magnificent opportunities, I have traveled extensively abroad and acquired great hands-on experience". Clemente Yerovi was the President of the Bank of Guayaquil, "from him I learned his interpersonal skills, he knew how to get along well with everyone around him, he behaved in such a way that he always remained true to himself. I have learned that I can be at the Club La Union or go to a trade union meeting feeling exactly the same. I don't feel neither as a grand bourgeois at the former, nor as a blue collar worker in uniform at the latter".*

Through all these years, he persevered in his pedagogical endeavors. In 1967 he was lecturer professor and afterwards dean of Vicente Rocafuerte Lay University Law School.

Even though very close to all his brothers -one of them died very young- he forged a privileged relationship with Jaime, "the politician in the family", which led him to actively campaign for his brother in the elections the latter won to become President of the Republic, and to accept afterwards the chairmanship of the Monetary Board.

When Jaime Roldós died in a plane accident on May 24th, 1981, Vice-president Oswaldo Hurtado was sworn in as President, and following the provisions of the Constitution, the Congress elected a new Vice-president: León Roldós.

As Vice-president of the Republic, Leon Roldós chaired the National Development Council, CONADE.

*"This provided me with a comprehensive insight into all country matter. I learned there that it is important to have a global vision of the country since many people have incomplete pictures. We must learn to look at the world globally and to decentralize while keeping in mind we have a single country; we must acknowledge differences to respect unity. I learned how to gather and manage information; it was a great school for life and it counterbalanced the fact that I didn't have a chance to pursue further my training after undergraduate studies".*

Once his mandate as Vice-president and chairman of the CONADE was over, professional opportunities emerged. He didn't go back to any particular bank, but worked as a professional consultant in legal banking and education.

He decided to run for President of the Republic for the Socialist Party, quite aware that he had no chance but convinced that the time was right and ripe to strengthen the Party. He was bitterly disappointed by the lack of activist collaboration some people had promised.

*"I could count it as one of the negative experiences in my life. Now I know that we must learn to take up responsibilities when circumstances guarantee the fulfillment of at least support expectations. This was an adventure which shattered my usual frame of mind of acting on solid ground".*

In his consultant work for National Council of Universities and Polytechnic Schools (CONUEP), he focused on the possibility of autonomy for the University. This brought about the challenge to take the theoretical proposal into a concrete reality in the University of Guayaquil.

Those who suggested he should run for Vice-chancellor recall one of their arguments:

*"There is no way out for the University without a new model, you have proposed it, you must now demonstrate it is feasible".*

Roldós had spent many years as a lecturer and professor. He had also carried out social research work, but even more important, he had always remained deeply attached to his alma mater. Knowing this, the former Vice-chancellor turned to him for help in securing government support when the University was going through difficult times, particularly during the President Sixto Durán Ballén administration. He accepted, and thus was able to get more thoroughly acquainted with the problems the University faced.

## The Leader in Action

On October 31st, 1994, León Roldós began his mandate as Vice-chancellor of the University of Guayaquil. Seven years later, nobody doubts that his administration has been successful, for when he took up office, the problems were so evident that no special diagnosis was needed. Lack of discipline was widespread; strikes, incidents, and violence were daily features; corruption ran rampant, and there was a profound academic and even material degradation of the institution.

Roldós understood that

*"It was important for the University to overcome the contradictions it had been subject to and that a 'change from bad to good' approach will encounter resistance from those who were part of the previous age. Therefore, I decided to take the past as a fact, a reference, and not to dwell on it, but rather to emphasize the renewal process, underlining the collective work aspect of it".*

This explains why he implemented the consultation mechanism. He convenes consultations promoting the idea that he wants "everyone to play a leading role". This process assures that an opinion from even from the most passive individuals. There are two types of consultations: formal and indicative. The results of indicative consultations, as their name suggests, provide general guidelines for decision-making. The implementation of formal consultations results is compulsory.

*"It doesn't matter whether I personally like the result or not, I must abide by it. As it is sometimes the case, something could be obligatory and yet not be implemented, but when I am around, I keep my word."*

Many important decisions have emerged from this process: Amongst other significant reforms, a merit-based performance appraisal system for teachers, assessments in pre-university and freshman years, a two-year mandate for student and worker representatives in co-management, sanctions imposed to whoever hinders or disrupts normal academic or administrative work, and a budgetary policy based on real income.

In the University of Guayaquil, authorities are elected on an individual basis, not under joint tickets. This is how the Deputy General Vice-chancellor who won the elections did not belong to the group of Roldós supporters.

*"We had never had a real conversation before the elections, but ever since we talk a lot to ensure that we share the same views on the project. For the second mandate we run together and we won by 81% of the votes".*

When the Deputy Administrative Vice-chancellor who had been with Roldós since his first term died, someone who was overtly against the Roldós administration was elected for the second period, but "I invited him to have a chat and told him 'This are the rules of the game and I would like you to be part of it'. After two years working together, I can say that practically since the real work started, we feel at ease with each other and he is one of my best collaborators". In this regard, Roldós quotes once again his "master" Assad Bucaram.

*"I learned from him that, mistakenly, we often believe that the most important affairs should be discussed and managed with our most intimate circle. Assad used to place people from the opposition*

*in the most difficult key positions; if they are involved in the process -he would say- they will never be able to question it. Whenever I set up commissions in the University I make sure to include those who criticize me; it is basically the philosophy that if we act with transparency it is better to have the opposition onboard, taking part in the decision-making".*

Constantly striving to remain rational and to uphold and adequately manage the principle of authority, Roldós has been able to overcome many hurdles.

*"We have managed the level of authority with detachment; we take nothing personal. If the opponent has rights, we have to respect them. I don't want anyone to feel there is something personal. Now, when the University needs to be defended, it must be done with determination but within the law; I am absolutely adamant on this and besides it fills me with confidence".*

There is not much opposition at present to the Roldós administration in the University of Guayaquil. Even those who consider him authoritarian or for whom the changes have been detrimental agree that his presence is the best option for the University. Although some internal division still prevails in certain Schools and threatens at times to burden the change process, an innovative approach has been adopted:

*"When there is significant opposition within a School, I make room for the opponent group or the defeated candidate in the central administration in order to provide them with the opportunity to demonstrate they are an alternative and to force the winners to get in touch with their opponents if they need something from the central administration. In that way they both learn to work together".*

Co-governance has been considered an obstacle for the development of universities in Ecuador. Roldós has proposed a different approach. In his consultancy work mentioned earlier, he suggested that neither the universities' autonomy nor Córdoba's 1937 principles should be questioned, but rather that they should be redefined and adapted to present realities.

*"We redefined autonomy as a tool for advancement. Co-governance means to govern with, that is why in my understanding it differs from students' leadership and, consequently, I have proposed a principle -which was adopted- as part of the new law, that a student who fails his or her year cannot run for co-governance, since I cannot allow the worst student to sit with me around the same table to decide upon university matters; they have to be the best, so besides not failing, they must show high averages. After some initial reluctance, they now see this as a positive change. I think it was a vital step".*

In this sense, the alternation rule is applied to the letter in student and worker collective bodies. There are no life representatives; the mandate expires at the end of their term and even if there is no democratic renewal, they cease in their functions and the Vice-chancellor calls for new elections.

Another hurdle to overcome was the idea that a State University has to be free of charge. Roldós succeeded in implementing a two-pronged approach, dividing careers in two separate categories: traditional and new, and proposing a varying subsidies scale according to which subsidies for the first group can cover up to 85% of the expenses and for the second group they cannot exceed 40%.

Seven years later, Roldós still believes that problems stemmed from lack of discipline in all fronts, including finances. Today, lack of fiscal discipline is a thing of the past; teachers and administrative staff receive their salaries on time at the end of each month, accounting procedures are up-to-date and there are funds available for many tasks which had been previously neglected. And everything has happened merely by rationing the use of resources, with no additional income from the State. Surprisingly enough, changes have been implemented by the same staff who worked under the previous administration.

*"I applied another principle which I learned from Assad Bucaram when he was in Town Hall. You shouldn't change people in key post but rather keep them there -unless they are corrupt- because they possess the information and get it from others. If you change them, life will be unbearable for the newcomers. If inefficiency is the problem, corrective action can be taken, and we have done so. The financial director, the human resources manager, the general accountant, the secretaries, they are all the same, but they work quite well".*

Along with all these changes, the interaction between the University and the community also improved significantly. It had been previously almost non-existent. The Vice-chancellor acknowledges the importance of this.

*"That is why I have tried to reach out and build bridges with the community. The University Hospital Project, for instance, is a good example. It has become a community-owned project since it has an Executive Board composed of community representatives such as the Mayor, the Chairman of the Civic Board, the Chambers, the workers, the Minister of Health".*

One of his first decisions upon election was to move the Vice-chancellor's Office from the old building downtown to the University campus, where 85% of all university activities take place, because "you have to be where things happen; here I move about. I visit schools and laboratories, and they feel that Roldós is around". Maybe due to this permanent presence, the University grounds have lost their dirty, shabby looks to clean and beautiful gardens.

*"We managed to impose discipline even in tidiness; when a student draws graffiti on the walls I have him or her tracked down as well as his or her personal address, I summon the student to my office, notify the sanction and invite him or her to do the same thing at home. Usually they protest and then I take up the opportunity to make them reflect upon the fact that the University is also their home, their common home".*

Roldós is also a Congressman and an editorialist for several national newspapers. He says he can make it all happen because he can rely on excellent secretaries and a good staff. Nevertheless, when he confides that he is also a homely person and that his highest priority is to get home because he is committed to being with his wife and child, those of us who look at all this activity from afar understand that maybe all his endeavors are possible because his successive life experiences have taught him to view the country as his home, as he also likes to remind students about their University.