

The Case of Juliana Guerrero in Colombia: A Powerful Reminder of the Role of Student Movements in Safeguarding Quality in Higher Education

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Colombia is currently facing setbacks in its negotiations with several European countries aimed at simplifying the recognition of Colombian higher education degrees. This is happening despite the fact that several Colombian universities—such as Universidad de los Andes, Universidad Nacional, Universidad del Rosario, and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana—consistently rank alongside European institutions in major international rankings like QS.

Yet these negotiations have been overshadowed by the case of Juliana Guerrero, a candidate for the position of Vice Minister of Equality, who obtained a university degree without meeting the legal requirements. The degree was later annulled by the Fundación de Educación Superior San José, which is now under investigation by the Ministry of Education.

This case, which raises profound ethical and legal concerns regarding a university that issued degrees without complying with statutory requirements, has placed Colombia's oversight and quality assurance system under intense scrutiny. Notably, the Ministry of Education only intervened after substantial media pressure and the public denunciation made by a member of Congress with roots in the student movement. This is troubling, and it invites a deeper reflection on the country's quality assurance framework in higher education (Law 30 of 1992, Decree 698 of 1993, and Law 1740 of 2014).

At the same time, the case highlights something essential: the need for students themselves—and members of student movements more broadly—to play an active role in monitoring and safeguarding educational quality within higher education institutions. Indeed, this case only came to light because Representative Jennifer Pedraza, a former leader in the student movement, publicly denounced the irregularities, prompting the annulment of the degree and the opening of formal investigations. Her intervention demonstrates how student-driven advocacy can translate into concrete actions that protect academic integrity.

This episode provides a striking illustration of Hamish Coates (2005) findings about the importance of incorporating student engagement into quality determinations in higher education. The Juliana Guerrero case shows that it was the student movement that alerted authorities and the media to the irregular issuance of a university degree, positioning students as key actors in quality assurance and as watchdogs ensuring compliance with the legal requirements for degree conferral. This serves as a call to design quality evaluation procedures that formally integrate student participation.

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Moreover, effective monitoring and oversight require real information about what students are actually doing within universities —data that can meaningfully assess their contribution to productive learning. Universities should therefore adopt management approaches that embed active student participation, including administrative mechanisms that connect students with official reporting channels within government agencies. Only through such mechanisms can institutions genuinely strengthen the processes that ensure quality in higher education.

Bibliography:

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