

José Alejandro Cheyne García: “Universities have to face the challenge of articulating social sectors with diagnoses and solutions”

In an interview with the journal *Advances in Science*, the president of the Universidad del Rosario, José Alejandro Cheyne García, commented on the relevance of academia and research in times of crisis, such as the one Colombia is currently going through. He assures that the best way to face the current challenges is for all social sectors to work together and pay special attention to the ideas of young people.



By: Inés Elvira Ospina
Photos: Milagro Castro,
Leonardo Parra, and UROSario

ing hand-in-hand with young people, with open and permanent communication channels to listen to and gather their ideas to forge real and useful solutions to face the current and future challenges of the country. In his words, “Their voices are necessary inputs for the transitions that we must assume in the face of the decisions and changes that are essential to guarantee a better country.”

Advances in Science—How has the university been adapting to the “new normal” in terms of research?

José Alejandro Cheyne García (JACG): University institutions are organizations that have been adapting, for more than eight centuries, to changes in context and have managed to keep their institutional identity and recognition as relevant actors for the progress of humankind. Particularly, in terms of research, Universidad del Rosario, with nearly four centuries of existence, has matured in recent decades as a scientific ecosystem that has allowed it to adopt policies, strategies, guidelines, and tools for the implementation of this essential function and to meet all the requirements that may arise from the society.

To this end, we have adapted our institutional commitments to three fundamental pillars: cutting-edge science, knowledge networks through research ecosystems, and the promotion of sci-

The concern for the social and economic crisis that the country is going through, deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the academia must contribute in finding efficient solutions that can open sustainable paths are issues of paramount importance for the president of the Universidad del Rosario, **José Alejandro Cheyne García**. For the past three years, he has been guiding this institution, which will celebrate its 368th anniversary in 2021.

According to Cheyne, in times of crisis, research is the most accurate tool for decision-making because its strictness shows the reality and suggests the paths that should be taken. In this sense, the Rosario’s mature scientific ecosystem allows the institution to be an active player in the discussions on the issues of different sectors in Colombia.

The president, an economist and a doctor in pedagogy, also stresses the importance of work-

←
As the president José Alejandro Cheyne García explains: “We have adapted our institutional commitments to three fundamental pillars: cutting-edge science, knowledge networks through research ecosystems, and the promotion of scientific talent.”

entific talent. This allows us to empower the tools used for promoting research (calls and services to researchers) and incentives that in turn promote of quality science to increase the flexibility of research management processes (extensions, changes in fundable items, and adjustments in committed results) and the adoption, by professors and students, of virtual platforms to continue with specific activities within projects. These are just some examples of this adaptation process. More importantly, all of these are related to the context of the process of scientific integrity.

What are the topics that you are the most concerned about regarding the situation in Colombia, and how do you think research could contribute to possible solutions?

JACG: One of the major problems is the existing disconnection between social needs and the formulation of sustainable, long-term public policies that focus on the solutions of critical structural conditions in the country (poverty, inequality, informality, quality education, among others).

In this sense, the research being conducted in many universities in our territory provides sufficient evidence to better understand the social challenges we must address.

This evidence must necessarily become an input for the elaboration of public policies with a clear orientation. As is traditionally the case, Universidad del Rosario has been actively involved in providing solutions to these structural problems in Colombia. From the colonial times to the active participation of our Rosario community in the mo-

President Cheyne stresses the importance of working with young people: "We ran a 'reading' and surveyed 2,513 young people to find out what they think, what they feel, and what they want in Colombia. We wanted to submit this proposal with research that would allow us to draw a reliable roadmap for our country."

ivate Colombia, which includes all schools and faculties in research processes, which proposes solutions for the global reactivation of our country. Finally, there is the **EFI Alliance (EFI stands for Formal and Inclusive Economy)**, one of the eight major research ecosystems funded by the national govern-

ments of paramount importance, such as the Seventh Ballot Movement (Séptima Papeleta movement), which gave rise to our constitution in 1991.

How was the experience of connecting with young people to contribute to Colombia's dialog?

JACG: The experiences highlighted by young people in the current social, political, economic, and cultural contexts reflect political decisions that have been made throughout history and which, in a crisis such as the one stemming from the pandemic, stress the major weaknesses of our social contract. In this sense, their voices are key inputs for the transitions we must assume when faced with the decisions and changes required to guarantee a better country.

Under the current circumstances, we are engaged in constant dialog and research with the most vulnerable social sectors. For example, the research community permanently monitors what young people in Colombia think and feel to understand their needs. Another example of what we do is the project **Reacti-**



Results from the study: What do young people think, feel, and want? Led by Universidad del Rosario in alliance with Casa Editorial El Tiempo, the Hanns Seidel Foundation, and the polling company Cifras y Conceptos.

ment, where, from an interdisciplinary approach, we discuss local and global solutions to the problems of informality and lack of social and productive inclusion.

In our studies, we found that young people's credibility in institutions and simultaneously their recognition of universities as institutions they trust pose a challenge. This is a challenge to open spaces for a dialog with them, where they can express their needs, ideas, and solutions. From the President's Office, together with our academic units, we keep an active dialog with the young people of Rosario and the country so that combining their and our researchers' knowledge, we can build solutions to the structural problems that affect the youth: the lack of opportunities, quality education, employability, and the development of youth entrepreneurship. We believe that entrepreneurship, particularly among our young people, will be a substantial driver of development.

How do you see the near future of the university in general and, specifically, in research?

JACG: Universidad del Rosario has performed extraordinarily in research and its impact. Since 2018, our main indicators of scientific research quality have accelerated. Our researchers are publishing their research in the best journals worldwide, where cutting-edge topics are being discussed at a global level, and these publications are the result of understanding the country's structural problems, such as autoimmune diseases,



the sequencing of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Colombia, the problems of armed conflict, informality, climate change, and its effects on Colombian ecosystems, to mention just a few subjects.

These are current and relevant matters for the country and world science. As I mentioned before, we have built a mature research ecosystem with a broad relationship among different players. This has led us to be proactive in the research needs of our territory.

In 2020, during the pandemic, we activated approximately 20 research projects to deal with the country's challenges. We have attracted resources for promoting research from national and international funders for approximately 10 billion pesos, with a current portfolio worth approximately 57 billion pesos represented in 80 national and 65 international proposals. This is a dynamic and promising research ecosystem for the future.

This is framed in the fact that the university has a strategic path based on the relevance and capacity for social transformation from the articulation of its mission in dialog with the local and global populace. Therefore, research has been maturing the capacities for the generation and promotion of scientific talent, as well as the consolidation of a scientific structure that produces thought and analysis, which contributes to the solution of local problems from cutting-edge science.

What is the biggest challenge that the academy is facing right now, and how does it interact with research?

JACG: Greater articulation with the environment that allows the university to speak with the country about the major structural problems it is facing (poverty, inequality, and informality, among others). This implies that the academia must undertake increasing efforts to bring scientific evidence to the national dialog, and for this purpose, it must stop considering itself as an isolated and fragmented organization in its mission roles.

In this sense, we must coordinate the scientific dialog among universities by establishing scientific alliances, strategic coordination, and joint work. An example of this are the initiatives we have with the Universidad Nacional, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Universidad de los Andes, Fundación Cardioinfantil, and Méderi hospital, among other major players in the country's scientific ecosystem, to jointly promote the challenges faced by Colombia. We seek to establish allies at the regional and global levels to build alliances with the Latin American stakeholders. ■