

Something rotten in the state of Spain, say whistleblowers

Critics condemn culture of cronyism and corruption in the academy. Paul Jump reports

As Spain struggles under the weight of unsustainable borrowing costs and an unemployment rate touching 25 per cent, its higher education sector has not escaped the turmoil.

Academic salaries have been cut several times and the country's science budget has been slashed by nearly 25 per cent. The government has also set up a committee to consider reforming Spain's universities, only one of which – Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona – appears in the top 200 of the latest *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*.

But while the committee is expected to focus on structural issues such as funding and autonomy, many critics claim that the real drag on Spanish university quality is the culture of politicisation and cronyism that has also been blamed for bringing the country's *cajas* (regional savings banks) to their knees.

Critics claim that the power structures in many universities are dominated by nepotistic networks that tolerate and even promote all manner of non-meritocratic and unethical practices among members, while coming down hard on those who dare speak out against them.

According to Spanish educationist José Penalva, 98 per cent of Spanish university positions are won by internal candidates selected by their academic colleagues. The free flow of personnel between local politics and senior university management means that these professors, in turn, are often in hock to political interests, he claims.

"This means that only the more intellectually and politically servile get posts, and if you criticise the system, you are accused by the Spanish academic community of not having 'trust in institutional democracy'. So the good researchers and lecturers have to leave Spain," Penalva says.

He personally experienced the consequences of breaking the "code of silence" when in 2010 he published a book titled *Corrupción en la Universidad (Corruption in the University)*. He was driven to write it by the campaign of "threats, insults and envy" to which he claims

to have been subjected by the University of Murcia after he went to court in 2007 to obtain a chair in education that he says had been earmarked for a less-qualified academic who was a friend of Murcia's rector, José Antonio Cobacho Gómez.

Penalva was sacked for alleged absenteeism shortly after the book was published. He is challenging the dismissal in court, but expects the case to drag on for some time.

A Murcia spokesman denies that the disciplinary action had anything to do with the book.

Touching a nerve

Since publishing *Corruption in the University*, Penalva has been contacted by a large number of Spanish



Penalva sacked but not silenced

academics who also claim to have suffered after falling foul of their local power networks.

Among the stories (which he hopes to collate into another book) is that of Jorge Lirola Delgado, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Almería.

He says he was suspended last November for four years and three months after reporting the university rector, Pedro Roque García Molina, to the local chief prosecutor, Antonio Pérez Gallegos, for alleged criminal offences. According to Lirola, the rector then acted as "judge and jury" and found that he had acted with "serious disregard for superiors" and had caused "serious injury to the dignity of the staff or administration" of Almería.

Lirola also claims to have spent more than 200 hours waiting to be seen by the chief prosecutor, while a legal challenge to his suspension

will not come to court until summer 2014.

In the meantime, he is entitled to neither salary nor unemployment benefit, he says.

"This is how justice functions in Spain," he told *THE*. "Nobody but a judge can alter the decision of a rector, and my case will not be heard until more than two years after the events occurred."

The university did not respond to a request for comment.

Stories also abound of alleged financial misconduct by senior officials in Spanish universities. One example, reported by Spanish newspapers in February, concerns the former rector of the Complutense University of Madrid, Carlos Berzosa Alonso-Martínez.

He was accused by his local authority of "grave irregularities" over the construction of houses and the passing of "impossible invoices", such as one for 57 car journeys to Athens by a researcher and another for €1,700 (£1,330) in wine for a science programme.

See no evil

But perhaps most serious for the quality and reputation of Spanish universities is the alleged toleration of research misconduct committed by members of the alleged power networks.

One example that has garnered much attention is that of Gonzalo Astray Dopazo, a PhD student at the University of Vigo, two of whose first-authored papers were retracted in January 2011 by the *Journal of Chemical and Engineering Data*. The retraction notices explain that "significant portions" of the papers "duplicate" sections of work previously published by Chinese authors.

The journal's former editor-in-chief, Kenneth Marsh, told reporters during a visit to Vigo last summer that in his view – which he confirmed to *THE* – the case amounted to straightforward plagiarism.

However, by then an investigative panel convened by the university – which contained no external members – had already concluded that the duplications were no more than "an accumulation of successive and negligent errors".

Neither Astray nor his PhD supervisor, Juan Carlos Mejuto Fernández, responded to *THE*'s request for comment. But Mejuto



No más more stories about corruption in Spain's universities have emerged since José Penalva went public with his claims, but few expect to see substantial change soon

told Spanish newspaper *El País* in May 2011 that his group had used the Chinese papers to help overcome their own difficulties with writing in English, and had accidentally sent the wrong file to the journal.

A group of distinguished Spanish economists wrote on the blog *Nada es Gratis* last December that this explanation "challenges the intelligence of anyone who has suffered the gruelling review process in good

journals". One of those economists, Luis Garicano, professor of economics and strategy at the London School of Economics, is a member of the Spanish government panel on university reform.

For such observers, insult was added to injury in September 2011 when Mejuto and two collaborators were awarded a €112,000 prize by the Galician regional government's education department – headed

by former Vigo dean Jesús Vázquez Abad.

In October, Astray's name topped a list of Vigo students eligible for an "excellence award" for the best PhD thesis of 2011. After pressure from the international media and scientists, the university removed his candidature on the eve of awarding the prize.

The dean of Vigo's Faculty of Sciences, Pedro Antonio Araujo Nespereira – a former PhD student of Mejuto – told *THE* that the retracted articles were irrelevant to the judging of the excellence prize.

He also insists that they had formed no part of Astray's thesis.

Araujo says that Vigo's original investigative committee performed a "rigorous analysis" of the plagiarism allegations, and he notes that Mejuto has published more than 100 articles "without any problems detected".

He also denies that any "back-scratching network" exists within his faculty.

'No complaints', says dean

"The people [here] are elected democratically and supervised by the rector," he says. "There have never been any complaints."

Nevertheless, allegations of other irregularities within the faculty abound, many of which were raised at a forum in Madrid earlier this year organised by a fledgling network of academics titled the Platform Against Corruption at Spanish Universities.

A source within Vigo says: "The whole system is rotten. But the vast majority of the lecturers, professors and students – probably because of fear of reprisals – look the other way."

Penalva adds that this is also true of his experience, and he expresses scepticism that the university reform committee will get to grips with such deep-seated cultural issues.

"My feeling is the committee will use fashionable words such as 'excellence', 'productivity' and 'internationalisation', and ask for more autonomy and more money," he says.

"But in the current structure, that means more power to the current professors, so it will have no effect on nepotism." paul.jump@tsleducation.com