

# Knowledge: The invisible thread

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Hosted by Imperial College, a group of scholars gathered in London last September to discuss the role that science, including the social sciences, could play in Colombian development. They were mostly doctoral students from a wide range of disciplines based at a good number of universities in the United Kingdom. Their concern was with the exchange of knowledge between the two countries. Far from dealing with an abstract concept or with distant policy goals, they were particularly interested in further consolidating the connections that their respective projects have already established between the academic communities in Colombia and the United Kingdom. It was a propitious moment, as the prospect of peace, following the negotiations with the guerrillas led by President Juan Manuel Santos, opened ample new opportunities for Colombian engagement with the outside world.

Most of the themes covered in that two-day symposium addressed specific problems to Colombia: the urban poor, sexual violence during its armed conflict, transitional justice... But they all had global implications, not only for peace and welfare elsewhere in the world, but for other key areas where Colombia has much to offer: biodiversity, food security, the environment. The variety of topics was impressive, from tackling the Zika epidemic in Latin America and reimagining Utopia in the 21st century through life at the circus, to the sustainability of fishing. As I listened to a series of fascinating talks, I reflected upon the values Colombians have traditionally attached to education and the extent to which education has helped to forge links between the United Kingdom and Colombia.

The educational connection between the two countries has long historical roots. In the early days of the republic, the Santander administration (1819-1827) adopted the Lancasterian mutual instruction system, a monitorial method of teaching developed by the English educator Joseph Lancaster, which helped Colombia in its first efforts to expand primary education after achieving independence. Other foreign models also shaped the intellectual trajectory of the nation, firmly eclectic. However, the connection with Britain remained particularly significant throughout the nineteenth century. If Colombian liberals found inspiration

in Jeremy Bentham, conservatives looked towards Cardinal John Newman. A selected few sent their children to Stonyhurst College, a Jesuit public school in Lancashire. Even fewer Colombians perhaps went then to British universities, but Diego Fallón, who later made a name for his contribution to Colombian musicology, went on from Stonyhurst to study engineering at the University of Newcastle. In 1883, Rafael Núñez, former and future president, who had previously served as a Colombian consul in Liverpool, recommended the study of Herbert Spencer, as he advocated the need for national conciliation. Decades later, in his *Estudios ingleses* (English studies), Carlos Arturo Torres also praised Spencer for his lessons about liberty and tolerance at a time when Colombia was trying to overcome the tragedy of the Guerra de los Mil Días (War of Thousand Days, 1899-1902).

I offer these selective episodes merely to illustrate some of the developments in what often seems an invisible thread, beyond trade and investment, that has connected Colombia with the United Kingdom in important and enduring ways since independence, either directly, through the personal experiences in educational establishments, or indirectly, through the intellectual influences of key thinkers. It was nevertheless a limited connection, constrained by the poverty of Colombia and its inward-looking character and relative isolation, which continued to mark a large part of its life during the twentieth-century.

Over the past five decades, however, the country has undergone major social transformations, including the massive expansion of its university education. 'Ser pilo paga' ('it pays to be a nerd') has been the most recent initiative, launched by the government of President Santos in 2014, that has allowed so far over 20,000 pupils from the poorest backgrounds to study in the leading universities of the country. As university education expanded, pursuing a post-graduate degree was incorporated into the national educational dream, while British universities became favoured destinations among the growing student population. The number of Colombians trained at British universities may not be as impressive as the significant role they have played back in their country, in both the private and public sectors, as well as in academic life. President Santos, who studied at the London School of Economics


is just the most prominent example today. The numbers are increasing however. By 2013, Colombian students in the United Kingdom went up by 135 per cent from the previous decade. That year, representatives of more than 40 British universities participated in the Education UK Exhibitions coordinated by the British Council in Bogotá and Medellín.

The educational connection between the two countries does not just flow in one direction. Colombian scholars now contribute to the research output of British institutions. Women stand out in different fields: the physicist Alexandra Olaya, Reader at University College London, works on quantum mechanics of biomolecular processes; Blanca Huertas, Senior Curator at the Natural History Museum, on butterflies; Isabel Ruiz Olaya, Official Fellow in Economics at Harris Manchester College in Oxford University, on remittances and forced migration. Research collaboration schemes, through the Newton-Caldas Fund, are strengthening links between the academic communities in both Colombia and the United Kingdom working in diverse areas such as rural and urban development, or climate change. Some of the research conducted in Britain has not only had concrete application in Colombia but the Colombian experience has served as a bridge to reach out to other developing countries: consider the Multidimensional Poverty Peer Network that President Santos launched together with Professor Amartya Sen in the University of Oxford, in 2013, an approach to fighting poverty using a methodology developed at the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative.

Important security gains have already opened new horizons for the exchange of knowledge between the two countries beyond scientific research, a more mundane knowledge that will bring closer both societies.

As the Spanish language grows in popularity, Colombia has become an increasingly attractive destination for students in their gap year after leaving school. Over the past two decades, some British universities have developed well established programmes in Colombia for their students of Spanish during their required year abroad, when they attend courses at Colombian universities, acquire some working experience and write blogs about their encounters with the tropics.

‘The risk is that you may want to stay’: Sophie Foggin, a student from Bristol adopted the Colombian slogan as the headline of one of her blogs in *El Tiempo*, describing her sojourns with her family in Bogotá, Medellín and Cartagena. Tourism is of course a promising sector coming on the back of the achievements in security, as witnessed first-hand by the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall in their visit to Colombia in 2014, which included trips to the Chiribiquete National Park and Caño Cristales. British birdwatchers, fully aware of the extraordinarily rich avian biodiversity of the country, are set to explore further these and other routes in the Amazons, the Chocó, the coffee zone or the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

By leading our country towards peace, through his resolute efforts recognised in the award of the Nobel Prize, President Santos is laying firmer grounds for Colombians to regain national pride. Education has been one of the most cherished historical values of Colombian society. As Colombians regain self-confidence, they will see the need to revise their own history and perhaps rediscover a civilising process that has remained clouded by decades of conflict. President Santos’s timely visit to the United Kingdom represents an opportunity to make the enduring thread of education, that has historically linked our two countries, more visible. 

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