

EDITORIAL

University and society. Forgotten responsibilities?

What are the factors of change in a society? The answer to this question is complex. What is true is that education and science must be motors of change in a society. Together they are the most important factors for social change, forming the basis of progress. Universities, as higher houses of knowledge and study, should play a key role in this transformative task of the world around us. But, are we prepared for this?

One of the main obstacles that make the interaction between university and society difficult is the construction of appropriate communication or relationship channels. Outreach activities and public engagement are essential in higher education institutions. They are the main expressions of their social responsibility and should be transversally integrated into the whole amount of institutional functions.

One of the chief components of the university-society relationship is the interaction between university and productive media, which is basically carried out through technical assistance and consultancies, innovation and technological transfer, applied research, graduate and postgraduate students and continuing education. Although productive media play a key role in the development of a country, knowledge and education centers (represented by universities) and research centers must serve as centers of consciousness for current and future generations.

As academics and scientists, we cannot forget our social engagement. We have the responsibility of sharing our knowledge and expertise with the general public at all levels. In short, serving people should be the primal objective for universities and science.

Does it make sense to produce top scientific results in a country where people cannot benefit from them? Does it make sense to make higher education accessible to only a part of the population, leaving the rest out of it? These compromises and responsibilities are usually forgotten in most of the academic institutions. They are pointed as main objectives, but generally the actions put in practice to implement them are very few.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten, as an important part of academic and research activities, the effective communication with science and education-related policy makers. Science and education administrators should be informed about our work and its impact on society, at all levels: from the social, economic and political points of view.

Pertinence, in higher education, is the phenomenon by which the multiple relationships between university and environment are established. The interaction of university, a social institution, with the society in which it is inserted, is manifested in different ways and with diverse structures, either within the university or the social environment. We can establish different pertinence dynamics between universities and companies, in addition to countries, social sectors, the set of social values, international processes, cultural processes, and between universities and the region in which it is inserted. These relationships will constitute spaces in order to define pertinence and determine how pertinent is higher education.

For a long time, teaching, research, and outreach and public engagement activities have been regarded as essential functions of the university, considering outreach as the real “social function”. Nowadays, with the inclusion of pertinence in the world’s higher education agenda, the social function emerges as the essence of the university itself. The term “extension” and the concept it implies, are vanishing from the university language little by little.

According to García Guadilla: The social function of the university is not completely accomplished neither through “extension” nor through tighter relationships with the productive sector. In the first case, because the idea of extension is that of something “added”, both not substantial within the university. In the second case, because the university-society relationships must reach further than the relationships of the university with the productive sector¹.

Consequently, outreach activities arise as a mature expression of institutions, as far as they have assumed that the fragmentation of activities weakens them as a whole, whilst the cooperation and interrelationship among them tend to overcome the limitations that prevent innovation from evolving.

This is the reason why the university is obliged to create the conditions required to respond to the demands, not only of the productive medium, but also to society as a whole. As long as universities work to identify and contribute to the solution of economic and social problems, they will be seen as pertinent institutions.

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¹ C. García Guadilla. “El valor de la pertinencia en las dinámicas de transformación de la educación superior en América Latina”. En L. Yarzabal (Editor). La educación superior en el siglo XXI. Visión de América Latina y el Caribe, Caracas, Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe/Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura, pp. 68-69. 1997.