

Quality and the social responsibility of universities¹

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1. Context

We live in an increasingly complex world marked by alarming imbalances. Society is faced with a series of transformations: the growing significance of knowledge as a determinant of development, environmental degradation due to human pressures on the planet, and domination of other cultures, which paves the way for their disappearance. These changes necessitate a system of higher education that addresses the needs of society.

The current situation is drastically restructuring the way we live, affecting both our daily lives and events on a global scale. At this time of change, characterised by an ongoing effort to improve the human condition and by the extension of quality of life and opportunities to all, a richer, more complex notion of development is needed. Rather than being viewed solely in material terms, development must also be ethical, intellectual, affective and moral (Morin, 1999).

We have the opportunity to shape an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives aligned with individual and collective needs and interests. To achieve this, we need a new model of development that allows us to tackle the problems we have helped create. The idea of sustainability should be a guiding principle in the process of designing this new vision, which will enable us to transform existing structures and influence individual behaviours in order to generate development that is fair and equitable.

In essence, sustainability is a gradual, dynamic process that brings about fair and democratic change in our quality of life. It implies a structural change towards new forms of global conviviality (Jiménez Herrero, 2000), a change that allows us to introduce a standard for judging institutions and existing practices in so-called modern societies (Elizalde, 2003). Sustainability should therefore be the goal that our actions at the individual, community, national and global level are aimed at achieving.

According to Freire (2001), the idea of change presupposes that it is possible, but it is essential to understand the reality that is the starting point and the reality that we are working towards. Thus, sustainability needs to be understood as a process of change and transition between the past, where we find our identity, the present, which defines our needs, and the future, towards which we direct our aspirations and efforts.

2. Education as an instrument of change for transformation

True education is praxis—human reflection and action upon the world to transform it (Freire, 1969). It supports a process of self-discovery and learning, fosters personal development, and helps people find their role in society, as well as strengthening communities and stimulating social progress.

Education should inspire, provoke and motivate the free and active participation of individuals in their reality and equip them with tools that enable them to construct a new approach to problems in their physical and temporal environment. Recovering the

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human capacity to evaluate, compare, choose, decide and act upon the world (Freire, 2001) is more crucial now than ever before.

One of the key aims of higher education is to foster all-round personal development and educate citizens who are responsible, informed and committed to working for a better future. Achieving these objectives requires a profound transformation of higher education to create a system that is capable of anticipating the needs of society and individuals.

Universities are social institutions that perform strategic functions for the development and consolidation of society, and for this reason they remain the main providers of higher education. A new world, however, calls for a new kind of university, one that creatively redefines its missions and functions, that reinvents itself if necessary so it can continue to serve as a space for reflection and creativity, and that provides the tools needed for social analysis, critical thinking and sustainability.

3. The ultimate goal: relevance and social responsibility

Social changes have shaped higher education institutions (HEIs), and this is reflected in their pursuit of social relevance and their capacity to respond to external demands. The need to be relevant underlies the multiple relationships between universities and their environment and is a decisive factor that reflects the alignment between the aims of HEIs and social expectations.

There is a tendency to see the notion of relevance as being concerned solely with the need for higher education to meet the demands of the economy and the productive sector. Clearly higher education must address these demands, but its relevance must be analysed from a wider perspective that takes into account challenges that concern society as a whole.

HEIs now perform their functions in a broader, more complex environment. This is leading to a reconfiguration of the structure of HEIs, their functions, and their links to different social and economic sectors. When the relevance of an HEI is assessed, it is therefore important to consider the institution's original characteristics, its diversity, its missions and objectives, and how it is organised.

Efforts to improve the quality of higher education must include an evaluation of its relevance. Quality cannot be an abstract, unimportant notion: it must be applied to a specific context and in relation to the relevance of an institution and its role in solving the problems faced by a community. Therefore, relevance is the key criterion when it comes to evaluating and verifying the quality of higher education.

Relevance and quality must underpin both academic and social objectives. The two concepts must always be linked: relevance, in its broadest sense, cannot be achieved through low-quality education. Both relevance and quality require a two-way process that involves universities and society, and as they define and evaluate these factors, internal and external actors must work to strengthen the social responsibility of HEIs.

4. Quality assurance mechanisms in higher education

When quality is evaluated based on a predetermined model that is not designed to take into account the specific context, the impact on quality may well be negative rather than positive (regardless of how perfect the model in question may seem). Quality is a social

construct and as such it requires reflection, dialogue and collective effort (Días Sobrinho, 2007), all of which must take place in the specific context in which an HEI operates. Clearly what works for one country will not necessarily yield positive results in another.

International trends indicate that accreditation of institutions and academic programmes is currently the most widely used quality assurance mechanism. Accreditation usually involves two basic processes: institutional accreditation by national and/or regional agencies, and evaluation of programmes, generally by professional associations.

We must always bear in mind that one of the main reasons for promoting accreditation is to ensure that HEIs pursue, improve and uphold their own standards, in accordance with the state of knowledge and their social responsibility. If accreditation fails to accomplish this, it cannot ensure public trust in the quality of institutions and programmes and the process becomes a pointless exercise.

It is therefore important that quality assurance mechanisms such as accreditation are constructed based on principles of good practice. When such mechanisms are being defined, every dimension of an institution should be questioned, with the extensive participation of all relevant actors in the design of processes.

Quality assurance mechanisms must be based on criteria that take account of relevance, democratisation, social equity, local and regional development, and the creation of public spaces for discussion. Evaluation should not focus exclusively on quantifiable products and results. Other aspects that should be looked at are educational processes and qualitative approaches; understanding of causes, conditions for production and contexts; and economic, social, cultural and political impacts and effects. Also, quality assurance mechanisms should place greater emphasis on assessment of solidarity and intra- and inter-institutional cooperation than on competitiveness, and should include an examination of performance with respect to social responsibility and public commitments.

4.1 The importance of indicators and criteria

Criteria and indicators are the cornerstone of accreditation processes. They underpin quality assurance and indeed the entire higher education system. Unsuitable criteria and indicators will lead to a system of higher education that is of poor quality and therefore unable to adequately respond to social needs. The resulting system of higher education will be one that is not relevant and fails to fulfil its social responsibility.

Any system of criteria and indicators should take into account how relevant academic programmes and the institutional project pursued by a university are to social needs. Curricula should also be reviewed and adapted based on local and national-level changes in the labour market and social environment. It is also important to consider the teaching-learning methods that are used and how well they fit the context. Finally, as a process outcome, the integration of graduates in society and the labour market should be assessed in qualitative terms rather than simply focusing on work participation rates. It is also important to take into account the contribution university research makes to the development of the community and the transfer of knowledge generated to society (when universities have explicitly included this activity in their mission), as well as the role this research plays in the search for solutions to global problems such as peace, sustainable development, poverty and cultural diversity.

5. Conclusions

Any model aimed at ensuring the relevance of institutions and the programmes they offer—and thereby guaranteeing that universities fulfil their social responsibility—should cover a number of key points that relate to institutions and their programmes:

- At the institutional level, the mission must reflect the institution's commitment to its community, including key concepts such as sustainable development, human development and social responsibility. The mission should be designed and reviewed based on the present and future needs of society.

- The programmes offered should address social needs. Rather than reflecting a purely economic perspective, they should contribute to sustainable development of the context in which the university operates. Programmes should be designed based on dialogue with relevant stakeholders that focuses on learning and on knowledge-related ideologies, philosophies and epistemological principles.

- It is essential that quality assurance mechanisms recognise the value of innovative practices—in all aspects of the institution and its programmes—that contribute to ensuring quality. Practices that could be taken into account include educational provision related to subjects such as sustainability and interculturalism, the inclusion of ethical values, and the development of skills for understanding and working with diversity.

Quality is a multidimensional, multilevel concept, and quality assurance processes are bound to reflect specific socio-cultural factors as well as the institutional, national and regional contexts in which universities operate. As a result, it is not feasible to identify a single set of indicators that will work well in all cases.

Redesigning criteria for accreditation is mainly a task for accreditation agencies and governments, but universities can contribute a great deal to this debate. If society expects universities to respond to contemporary needs, then higher education institutions must also play a role in defining alternative quality assurance models that enable them to demonstrate the logic behind their programmes and activities. Universities must be central actors in this process, and the challenge for them is to ensure that their legitimate social interests take precedence over the interests of the market.

Quality assurance should continue to evolve as the relevance of universities changes. The wide range of quality assurance mechanisms used around the world provides clear evidence that each context requires its own specific systems for ensuring quality, though accreditation is currently the most widely used approach.

This evolutionary process will require the transformation of mechanisms, criteria and indicators used in quality assurance processes, and such changes will contribute to ensuring the relevance and quality of higher education. In the future, when universities begin to broaden their missions, the quality assurance process will need to be much more complex, regardless of the system that comes to predominate. The transformation of higher education with a view to improving quality and relevance necessitates that universities assume greater responsibilities towards society.

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