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The Concept of Alliance as an Image and Positioning Instrument for Institutions of Higher Learning

La vinculación como instrumento de imagen y posicionamiento de las instituciones de educación superior

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Abstract

The present work provides a foundation for the concept of alliance which includes the ability of this to foster the university's societal position as based on public perception of the institution. Accordingly, the work briefly addresses the development of the university's

collaboration with the productive sector, and emphasizes the need for institutions of higher learning to consider as well, those social sectors (including the government) outside the realm of industry or technological expansion. The study concludes by affirming that alliance can become an effective instrument for promoting the university. It is therefore necessary to research the social perception of the university as a means of bolstering its relevance.

Keywords: Higher education, alliance programs, public opinion.

Resumen

En este trabajo se fundamenta un concepto de vinculación que incorpora la capacidad de ésta para propiciar el posicionamiento institucional a partir de la percepción que de la universidad tiene la sociedad. Para ello, se expone brevemente el desarrollo del concepto de vinculación universitaria asociado a la colaboración con el sector productivo y se enfatiza en la necesidad de que las instituciones de educación superior consideren también a los sectores sociales (incluido el gobierno) fuera del ámbito de la industria o el desarrollo tecnológico. Se concluye afirmando que la vinculación puede convertirse en un instrumento eficaz de promoción de la universidad, por lo cual es necesario realizar estudios relativos a la percepción social de las universidades como medios para fortalecer su pertinencia.

Palabras clave: Educación superior, programas de vinculación, opinión pública.

Introduction

The nineties was the era of great changes in the international environment. The transformation of East-West relations in the world, with the demise of the Soviet Union and the unique leadership of the United States has placed a market economy at the center of human activities, a situation in which the stewardship of international finance is manifested by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

In this context, Mexico began its shift to a market economy after its entry into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in the eighties, and consolidated its immersion in economic globalization by signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which went into effect in January of 1994. This economic paradigm shift has impacted national life, promoting democratization in the country, and changing the priorities of higher education. The professions have also experienced a process of change because two of the main labor markets are now government organizations and agencies.

In this regard, interest has been revived in the liberal professions, located principally in urban trade centers; services, information, and the educational demand has focused on them. Consequently, higher education has given priority to the direct and immediate requirements of the market. Thus, the critical role of the university and of university educational discourse has expanded, and its

meaning and location in the social perspective have been incorporated into the effectiveness and efficiency of the market economy. As a result, new terms and rules of action have appeared: evaluation of programs and individuals, accreditation, certification, excellence of postgraduate programs, merit pay, allocation of resources through competition between projects, incubators of technological enterprises, the generation of resources from alternative sources, administrative efficacy and efficiency, institutional modernization, reorientation of the educational offer toward market needs and links with the productive environment (Lloréns, 1996).

New circumstances for higher education

In the context briefly described, public institutions of higher learning (IHLs) were faced with the need to rethink their substantive and adjectival function (Reyes, 1995). This is because the country's universities have traditional structures and organizations in accord with a view of training professionals primarily in the various disciplines and areas of knowledge, where research on occasion is more responsive to the researchers' own priorities than to the environment, or even to those of the institution itself.

This view of public universities has long been geared toward meeting society's expectations. However, its ways of working are too rigid for the new requirements which society today imposes on service activities, since in many cases the IHLs' response tempo does not satisfy an increasingly-demanding market. This is compounded by a lack of communication and interaction that would enable the academic units to work together on joint projects, as well as the feeble correlation of efforts between the substantive functions of teaching, research and extension of the culture, services and administration; not because of a lack of will, but due to the inertias of work and goals traditionally separated from each other.

On the other hand, in the last twenty years there has been a change in the relationship of IHLs to society. Until recently, higher education institutions oriented their activities by means of the information that came from within, and generated a considerable isolation in order to preserve their autonomy. Hence, there is justifiable criticism to the effect that the IHLs were functioning as ivory towers, remote from the problems of their environment (National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education [ANUIHL], 2000a). Now it is necessary to understand the autonomy of universities as a factor that reinforces communication with the community, and not as an indicator reflecting a lack of interest or a distancing from their social environment. Therefore, the IHLs should today maintain relations with all social sectors, without identifying exclusively with any one of them, or being manipulated by any of them. Thus, while maintaining common sense in the social sphere, the universities must be involved in social life with a critical spirit and a positive manner. The basic functions of teaching, research and dissemination will have to be planned with a view to contributing to society's integral development (Martínez Rizo, 2000).

To achieve the foregoing, it is considered that alliance represents a fundamental element that would allow IHLs to interact with their environment, a concept with which such notions as collaboration and cooperation have been alternately identified. The concept has also been defined by the term relationships. However, it appears that today the term includes a wide range of activities (ANUIHL, 1998).

Alliance: the scope of the concept

The term *alliance* has become fashionable in the last decade. It is part of the jargon of specialists in higher education to give a new shade of meaning to the same dimension denoted by the terms *dissemination* and *extension*. However, the frequent and restricted use of the term limits it to the relationships of IHLs with industries or other enterprises of the so-called productive sector of society. In recent years there have been numerous courses, workshops and other liaison activities in which this conceptualization has been manifested (Martinez Rizo, 2000).

When the term *alliance* is used, there is habitually emphasized the relationship between universities and industries, businesses and other service companies, preferably private. This dimension is conspicuous for the globalization and processes of industrial, commercial and financial integration. However, we should not lose sight of other, equally-important dimensions: those relating to social and political development, to the continuous improvement of traditional systems—such as democracy and justice—and the proper integration of values and local traditions with those of other nations, constituting rich and novel cultural syntheses remote from extremes and radicalisms.

Given such diversity of scope in concept, it is necessary to emphasize that the relationship established between the university and society is not technical, but conceptual. Therefore, one must have a clear idea of what is considered relevant, and at the same time be able to detect when there would be a risk of falling into the irrelevance that threatens the universities. At the same time, it is of greatest importance to understand that all internal areas of the university—each with different and well-defined negotiators—have the responsibility of serving the needs of the environment, and not just those areas most closely related to economic activities. Therefore, it is essential that each institution have clarity concerning its social responsibility so that, based on it, it can remain allied with society (Martínez Rizo, 2000).

In the last two decades the term alliance, associated with higher education institutions and the relationship with their setting, has undergone several changes in its interpretation, concept and meaning. The term's usage in other countries such as the USA, Canada and England is different from that in Latin America, and especially in Mexico, where it has a broader connotation due to the various attributes that government agencies, business and education have allocated to it.

Convened by the Regional Centre for Higher Education in Latin America (CRESALC, its acronym in Spanish) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Regional Conference on Policies and Strategies for the Transformation of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean held in Havana in late 1996, addressed the issue of alliance, leaving clear the necessity for higher education to operate within contemporary society with a vision that would take into account the achievement of greater relevance, quality and international cooperation.

Thus, the alliance of the IHLs with the productive sectors makes a positive contribution to the training and retraining of students and academics; in solving problems at a local, regional and national level; in the pedagogical training of the faculty; in innovation and improvement processes taking place on both sides, as well as in the effective integration into cultural and community life (ANUIHL, 2000a).

Some authors point out that in Mexico, alliance tends to be perceived when academic activities and the work of society as a whole are permanently interrelated, providing not only knowledge and solutions to social problems, present and future, but also guiding, giving feedback and enriching programs of human-resource training and scientific research, as well as technological and cultural development (Castañeda, 1996). Thus understood, alliance is a viable process for strengthening academic development (Pallán, 1997).

Other authors define alliance as an integral process that articulates the substantive functions of teaching, research and cultural extension, and the services of the IHLs for their effective and efficient interaction with the socio-economic environment through the development of actions and projects of mutual benefit that contribute to their positioning and social recognition. Through these projects and actions, the substantive functions of the IHLs acquire content related to today's professional work, as well as presence and relevance to society, and also obtain information and experiences necessary for the training of human resources and continuous academic improvement. Therefore, in addition to an educational and scientific/technological phenomenon, alliance is a social and human phenomenon, because it is a transformative and inclusive activity that forms part of the XXI-century change process (Gould, 2001). As may be seen, this last definition incorporates new elements into those previously mentioned, such as *positioning* and *social recognition*, and for that reason, this paper proposes a broader concept, in which the alliance is:

The medium which allows the university to interact with its environment, coordinating effectively and efficiently its teaching, research and cultural extension services, while facilitating its ability to interact with productive and social sectors in actions of mutual benefit, which favors its strategic positioning (pp. 32).

This concept goes beyond the more generalized view of alliance, in that it is mainly related to the business or productive sector, setting aside the wide spectrum of possibilities which represent the so-called social sector (which includes the government setting), as revealed by a study conducted in 1988 under the auspices

of the ANUIHL and the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT, its acronym in Spanish). Of all the institutions surveyed, 82.2% revealed such relationships, specifically those established with businesses, although the term *alliance* was used in a concept as broad as *collaboration* or *cooperation* (ANUIHL, 1998). Thus, one can conclude that there is a general idea where the relationship is conceptualized as limited to the university-industrial relationship (Martínez Rizo, 2000).

Nevertheless, universities can also be allied with sectors different from the technological or industrial, and in this case, the teaching can be critical, without excluding the other functions (Varela, 1999). This implies that the training of professionals in charge of the IHLS should have as a starting point, communication with businesses, as well as interaction with social and productive sectors, which in turn define the labor market's behavior and the needs of the society they serve. These three elements form a continuous feedback process to integrate the alliance process, as shown in Figure 1 (Covarrubias, 1996; Cassaigne, 1997):

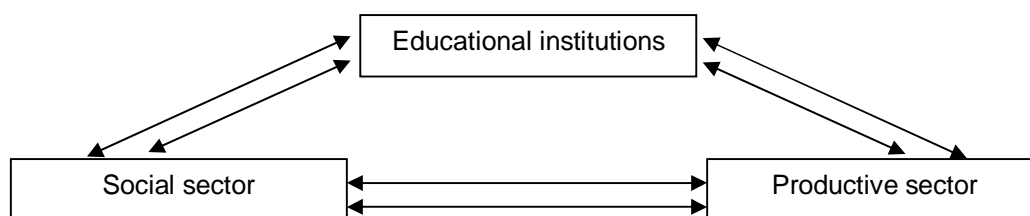


Figure 1. Relationship between the educational, social and productive sectors

Reductionist concepts impoverish the concept of alliance, which could have an extraordinary scope. For this, alliance must be conceived as the relationship of an institution as a whole to society, considering also the latter in an integrated manner; that is, not limited to the productive sectors alone, but also including the social sector (civic groups, government bodies, political parties, etc.). The idea is that all fields of knowledge cultivated by the IHLS contribute something to society, while the latter responds with valuable contributions. Understood in this way, the relationship becomes a two-way action: from the IHLS to society, and from society to the IHLS (ANUIHL, 2000a).

This means that the needs of productive and social sectors must be present in the design of alliance programs. It also involves overcoming the idea that alliance is a one-way street, giving rise to mechanisms that facilitate mutual benefits, which will no doubt be different, but valuable for both parties. The fact that the country's universities have a comprehensive alliance project is now part of the transformation of the System of Higher Education (ANUIHL, 2000a). Similarly, it is necessary for the IHLS to produce studies on the social perception of their institutions; these must exceed the theatrical or publicity aspect and consider the image based on social relevance and the perception which society has of that

relevance, so as to be better able to satisfy the demands of the external sectors on the subject of alliance.

In Mexico, state policies on science and technology have been the framework within which the concept of liaisons between IHLs and businesses has developed. In this process three stages can generally be distinguished: the first, from 1970 to 1980, which identified a model supported by the authority of the academic elite; the second was between the years of 1980 and 1988, governed by a model under the authority of the state bureaucracy; and the third starting in the late eighties and extending to the early years of the next decade, in which there was revealed a model of market integration. Today, a fourth period is being defined; its main features would be a kind of partnership between business, the university and government, market orientation, strong involvement of the academic community, and a standardization coming from and regulated by the government (Casas, 1999). At this stage the three aspects would converge in the full development of knowledge.

According to the above chronology there are distinguished three other periods through which the vision of the private sector regarding the public university has passed, with consequent effects on the connection and the formulation of policies regarding the production of knowledge. A first stage would extend to the mid-eighties, and would be characterized by going from ignorance to ideological conflict; the end of the eighties would finish up a second stage, characterized by a cooperative disposition; and the third stage, in the nineties, is distinguished by the pursuit of specific alliance mechanisms (Luna, 1999).

There was beginning to be a change, then, in the Mexican university's relationship with businesses; mutual association was starting to grow and to be diversified and promoted by both parties, so that the change was referred to as a new social contract between the academic world and society (Casas and De Gortari, 1999). This had awakened a legitimate concern in developing countries, which at that time, were seeing the need for schools and institutions to be open organizations, with horizontal interactions in each type, and vertical ones between types and levels; and linked with the national and international environment so as to show in that way their potential as an pioneering force for change. Only under such conditions would society come to terms with education as a affair that would compete with it directly; it would be organized and would participate actively and responsibly, contributing opinions that would nourish decision-making in the different educational settings, which at the same time would permit higher education to take a position as a foundational constituent of development (Secretariat of Public Education [SEP], 2001).

Alliance as a means to achieve positioning

Although its importance was recognized, the relationship between the IHLs and the various sectors of society was still limited, a situation representing a detriment to the social value of this type of education and to the identification of opportunities for collaboration. The challenge was to establish appropriate plans for greater social involvement in their development, as well as strengthen their units in connection with society and the immediate environment for which the National Education Program 2001-2006 (SEP, 2001) proposed in particular:

- Perfect mechanisms for coordination, consultation and social participation, ensuring the relationship between all sectors of society and the IHLs.
- Create Liaison Advisory Councils for Higher Education, whose purpose would be to collect systematically the views of social and productive sectors to enrich the policies established by the authorities and bodies responsible for coordinating higher education.
- Promote innovation and the sharing of successful liaison experiences in higher education.

The program started out from the objectives and strategies of the *2001-2006 National Development Plan* (NDP) and considers the complexity of the educational change that needs to be undertaken in order for the country to ensure its sustainable development (SEP, 2001).

Of the current activities undertaken by the IHLs to meet the objectives assigned to them, those that are aimed at strengthening ties with the social and productive sectors become increasingly relevant in that they permit a clearer understanding of the real needs of the society they serve. This attitude has enabled the IHLs to increase their sensitivity to the dynamics of economic and social developments occurring in Mexico and on a worldwide scale, with the consequent advantage representing greater social relevance, and thus, a better positioning and an increasing reinforcement of society's image of the IHLs.

In this sense, alliance—as defined above, is located in a place of privilege as a means for the public IHLs to be socially positioned as institutions that turn out not only professionals, but also useful knowledge and development proposals, by accepting the challenge for transformation imposed upon them by today's reality.

However, it is necessary to situate the concepts *image* and *positioning* beyond technomarketing's traditional definition, and to understand that the first refers to the internal and external perception of the institution and its task (Miller, 1999); that is, actions by which it fulfills its mission. On the other hand, *positioning* refers to the location of the institution in a particular context, which in this case is the society it serves. One might add that although positioning begins with knowledge of the institution, it refers not to that, but to what is achieved in the minds of individuals, so that the concept generated in the receiver is more important than that expressed by the transmitter. Hence, the individual mental location of those who refer to or

who hear something about the institution, as a whole, brings about its positioning in the social context (Ries and Trout, 1999).

The concepts mentioned have been treated differently by public and private higher education. In the first, it has been addressed only through national programs or at the initiative of their schools. The results have favored only some IHLs in the national context, as demonstrated within the Council of Public Universities and Related Institutions, in the sense that despite the achievements made by IHLs in recent years, their image has more or less deteriorated rather than gaining a better position as educational institutions at that level, because of the various types of conflicts they face (ANUIHL, 2000b).

In the case of private institutions, their primary strategy has focused on the continued promotion of their image based on a marketing plan which encourages and exerts pressure for a competitive environment which, in turn, allows improvement and renewal (Guttman, 2002). In addition, private IHLs are subject to continuous scrutiny by parents, who can penalize them by withdrawing their students if they do not perform to the parents' satisfaction.

The ability to enforce this responsibility does not exist in public schools, a difference which the vast majority of parents see with dazzling clarity. Not in vain was there a strong official tendency to grant the so-called *education bonuses*, which could be used by parents in institutions that yield good results (Tooley, 2002). This has generated a constant development of marketing strategies that impact not only private IHLs, but also public institutions, triggering competition by interacting with the sectors of society focused on marketing.

In this sense, alliance acquires a new characteristic different from those traditionally defined and conceptualized. That is, besides serving as a link, as well as an instrument of interaction and mutual benefit between the IHLs and the social and productive sectors, it promotes further institutional relevance; favors social recognition of the university; also, it improves its image, and therefore, its institutional positioning in the environment it serves.

Conclusions

From what we have seen above, we can conclude that the changes in the economy, the new economic and military leadership, the proposals for new paradigms brought about by globalization, have motivated social changes that have impacted higher education. That, coupled with the scarcity of government financial resources to support education; technological changes and changes in educational models based on lifelong learning; a more diverse labor world, with increased competition and new requirements in skills, abilities and knowledge, has forced the IHLs to seek new strategies for responding adequately to these challenges.

The alliance of the IHLs with the social and productive sectors has proved to be one of the most important strategies for addressing these challenges, insofar as it allows them to meet the requirements of those sectors, give feedback on academic functions in terms of quality and relevance, and obtain additional resources to reduce their budgetary needs.

Among the great variety of alliance concepts, two conceptual currents stand out: one that considers only the productive sector (business or industry), and that has had its predominant impact in the northwestern area of the international environment; and another which further adds the social sector, including different government levels, and to which Latin America has made significant contributions.

The posture of the IHLs regarding the demands of collaboration not only with society but with each other has changed from a reductionist concept, limited to certain types of liaison actions, to one of openness with a wide range of possibilities in response to global economic trends.

The new plan of competition generated by the changes already mentioned situates the public universities in a previously-unknown scenario. Repositioning them in the social and productive context has now become a necessity.

In public universities there are emerging new elements which had not been previously exploited with the intensity demanded by the market: promotion of mechanisms for coordination, consultation, promotion, corporate image and social participation; these have an impact on the positioning of the institution in its context.

Alliance can become an effective instrument for promoting the university when there is established an interaction of mutual understanding among the sectors, so that the perception of their image is consistent with their reality.

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