University Outreach Concept as an Image and Positioning Instrument of Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This document sustains a university outreach concept that incorporates the university's capacity to sponsor its positioning by means of the social perception of the institution. In doing so, this work briefly addresses the development of the concept of university outreach while associated to collaboration with the productive sectors while emphasizing the need of higher education institutions to additionally consider the social sectors (including government) that are not found in the scope of industry or technological development. It concludes that university outreach can be turned into an effective instrument to promote

the university. Consequently, it is necessary to research the social perception of universities as an approach to build up their pertinence.

Key words: Higher education, outreach programs, public opinion.

Introduction

The nineties were a time of great changes in the international scene. The transformation of East-West relationships with the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the sole leadership of the United States of America has placed the market economy in the center of human activities. The directorship over international finances by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank is manifest in this situation.

Within this context, Mexico began its change towards a market economy the moment it entered the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in the eighties and it consolidated its immersion into the economical globalization with the signing of the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which became operational in January 1994. This change of economical paradigm has had an impact on the nation's life, encouraging the democratization of the country and modifying the priorities in higher education. Professions also underwent a process of change because two of its major job markets have been government organizations and departments.

In this sense, the interest for liberal arts professions has been reactivated. These are to be found mainly within the urban business, services and information fields; and the educational demand has been centered in those professions. Consequently, higher education has given priority to the mediate and immediate requirements of the market. Thus, the critical role of the university and the university educational discourse has extended further, and the efficacy and the efficiency of market economy have been added to its significance and position within the social perspective. New performance terms and rules have appeared in that way: evaluation of programs and individuals, program accreditation, certification processes, excelled postgraduates programs, salary improvements based on incentives, grants access through the competition among projects, incubators of technological enterprises, funding generation through alternative sources, management efficacy and efficiency, institutional modernization, offer reorientation towards the market needs, and outreach with the productive environment (Lloréns, 1996).

New circumstances for higher education

With regards to the context briefly described above, public higher education institutions, (IES, for its Spanish acronym) were faced with the need to restate their substantive functions as well as their adjective function (Reyes, 1995). In view of

the fact that public universities in the country have traditional structures and organizations in accordance with a vision aimed mainly at forming professionals for the various disciplines and areas of knowledge, where often research responds more to the researchers' own priorities than to the priorities of the environment, or even to the priorities of the institution itself.

This vision in the public universities has satisfied society's expectations for a very long time. However, it has led to ways of working that nowadays turn out to be somewhat rigid for the new requirements imposed by society on the rendering of services, since the response rate of the IES, in many cases, does not satisfy an ever more demanding market. Added to this is the lack of communication and interaction between the various academic units to carry out joint projects, as well as the weak correlation of efforts among the substantive functions of teaching, research and extension of culture and services, as well as of the administration; this fact is not due to the lack of willingness, but rather to working inertias and goals which are traditionally separate from one another.

On the other hand, a change has taken place in the relationship between the IES and society during the last twenty years. Until recently, higher education institutions oriented their activities according to the information that came from within them, which led them to a considerable isolation for the sake of protecting their autonomy. Hence the justification concerning the criticism made of the IES that they behaved like ivory towers, detached from the problems in their environment (Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior [ANUIES], 2000a). Nowadays it is necessary to understand the autonomy of the universities as a factor that strengthens the communication with the community and not as an indicator that reflects the lack of interest or detachment from their social environment. Therefore, now the IES have to maintain relationships with all the sectors in society, without identifying themselves exclusively with one sector, nor being managed by any of them. Thus, without alienating themselves within their own social sphere, universities have to interfere in the social life with a critical mind and in a positive way. The substantive functions of teaching, research and extension should be planned bearing in mind the goal of contributing to the integral development of society (Martínez Rizo, 2000).

To achieve the above, outreach is considered as a fundamental element that allows IES to interact with their environment. This is a concept with which notions such as collaboration and cooperation have been identified alternatively or, else, which has been defined with the term relationships. However, it has been observed that such concept includes in fact a great diversity of activities (ANUIES, 1998).

The scope of the outreach concept

The term *outreach* went into fashion during the last decade. Now it is part of the jargon used by higher education specialists when referring to the same dimension denoted by the terms *diffusion* and *extension* with a new nuance. Nevertheless, the frequent and restrictive use of the term limits it to the relationship between the IES and the industries or enterprises of the so-called productive sector of society. During the last few years, multiple courses, workshops and other outreach activities have been carried out in which this conceptualization has been expressed (Martínez Rizo, 2000).

Whenever the term outreach is used, the emphasis is usually made on the relationship between universities and industries, businesses and other service enterprises, preferably within the private sector. This dimension is emphasized by globalization and the industrial, business and financial integration processes. However, other equally important dimensions should not be let out of view: those referring to social and political development; those referring to the continuous improvement of traditional systems–like the democratic and justice systems–, and those referring to an adequate integration of local values and traditions with those of other countries, thus constituting rich and new cultural syntheses far from extremes and radicalisms.

Faced with such a great diversity in this concept's scope of action, it is necessary to make emphasis on the fact that the relationship established between the university and society is not technical in nature, but conceptual. Therefore, it is necessary to have a clear idea about what is considered relevant, and to be simultaneously trained to detect when there is the risk of falling into the irrelevance that is threatening the universities. At the same time, it is highly important to understand that all the internal areas of the university–each one with its various and well defined interlocutors–are under the obligation to be at the service of the needs of the environment, and not only at the service of the areas closer to the economical activities. Therefore, it is fundamental for each university to be clear concerning what it conceives as its social responsibility, so that it keeps itself linked to society on this basis (Martínez Rizo, 2000).

During the last two decades, the term outreach, associated with higher education institutions and the relationship with their environment, has suffered a series of changes as far as its interpretation, concept and meaning are concerned. Unlike other countries such as the United States of America, Canada and England, for Latin America and, in particular for Mexico, the term has a much broader connotation due to the diverse attributes that government, entrepreneurial and educational organisms have assigned to it.

Organized by the Regional Center for Higher Education in Latin America (*Centro Regional para la Educación Superior en América Latina*, CRESALC) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Regional Conference concerning Policies and Strategies for the Transformation of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (*Conferencia Regional sobre Políticas y Estrategias para la Transformación de la Educación Superior en*

América Latina y el Caribe), held in Havana at the end of 1996, raised the subject on outreach, making it clear that it is necessary for higher education to operate within the contemporary society with a vision which takes into account the achievement with the greater international relevance, quality and cooperation.

Thus, the IES outreach with the productive sectors will contribute positively in the formation and updating of students and academics; in the solving of problems at local, regional and national levels; in the pedagogical formation of teaching staff; in the innovation and improvement of the processes that take place in both areas; as well as in the effective insertion in the cultural and communitarian life (ANUIES, 2000a).

Some authors point out that in Mexico, outreach begins to be perceived when the academic activities and the daily activities of society as a whole begin to interrelate permanently, not only contributing knowledge and solutions to current and future social problems, but also guiding, back-feeding and enhancing human resources and scientific research training programs, as well as technological and cultural development programs (Castañeda, 1996). Understood thus, outreach is a viable process to strengthen academic development (Pallán, 1997).

Other authors define outreach as the integral process that articulates the substantive functions of teaching, research and extension of culture and services of the IES for its efficacious and efficient interaction with the socioeconomic environment, through the development of mutually beneficial actions and projects that contribute to their social positioning and recognition. Through these actions and projects, the IES' substantive functions acquire content related with present day professional work, as well as relevance and presence before society. At the same time, they obtain the information and experiences necessary for human resources development and the continuous improvement of academic affairs. Therefore, besides being an educational and scientific-technological phenomenon, outreach is a social and human phenomenon as well, since it is a transforming and integrating activity that is part of the 21st century's process of change (Gould, 2001). As can be observed, this last definition incorporates new elements to the ones aforementioned, these being *social positioning* and *social recognition*. A broader concept is being proposed in this document, in which outreach is:

> The means through which the university can interact with its environment, coordinating efficacious and effectively its teaching, research and cultural and social services extension functions, while at the same time favoring its capacity to relate with the productive and social sectors in mutually beneficial actions, which favors its strategic positioning (pp. 32).

This proposed conception transcends the more generalized view of outreach, which relates it preferably with enterprises or the productive sector, putting aside the wide spectrum of possibilities represented by the so-called social sector (which includes the governmental ambit), as it was revealed in a study made in 1988 under the auspices of the National Association of Universities and Higher

Education Institutions (*Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior*, ANUIES) and the National Council for Science and Technology (*Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología*, CONACYT). Between the total amount of institutions surveyed 82.2% answered to have the type of outreach relationship mentioned, specifically those which they establish with enterprises, in spite of the fact that the term *outreach* was used in a concept as broad as *collaboration* or *cooperation* (ANUIES, 1998). Thus, it can be concluded that there exists a general idea in which outreach is conceptualized limiting it to the university-industry relationship (Martínez Rizo, 2000).

Notwithstanding, universities can link themselves with other sectors different from the industrial or technological ones as well and, in that case, teaching can prove to be fundamental, without this meaning that the other functions have to be excluded (Varela, 1999). This implies that the education of professionals under the responsibility of the IES should have, as a starting point, communication with enterprises as well as interaction with social and productive sectors, which in turn, define the behavior in the job market and the needs of the society they serve. These three elements make up a continuous feedback process to integrate the outreach process, as is shown in Figure 1 (Covarrubias, 1996; Cassaigne, 1997):
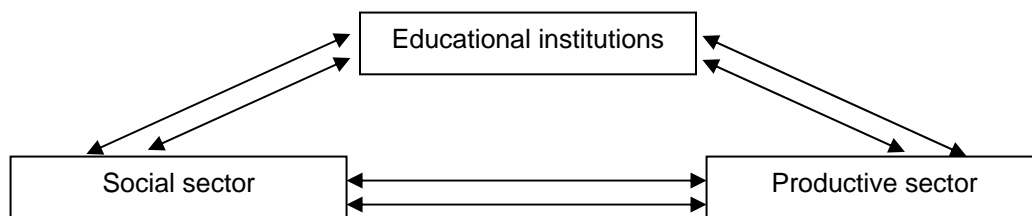
Figure 1. Educational, social and productive sectors relationship

Reductionist concepts impoverish the outreach concept, which can have an extraordinary scope of action. To achieve this, it is necessary to conceive outreach as the relationship between the institution as a whole and society, which should be considered in turn in an integral manner as well. That is, not to limit it exclusively to the productive sectors, but to include the social sector as well (civic groups, government organizations, political parties, etc.). The idea is that every field of knowledge developed by the IES should contribute in some how to society, while the latter should reciprocate by making valuable contributions. This way understood, outreach turns into a double way action: from the IES towards society and from society towards the IES (ANUIES, 2000a).

This means that the needs of both productive and social sectors have to be in the design of outreach programs. Besides, it implies that it is necessary to outgrow the idea that outreach is a one way road, in order to make room for mechanisms which can make it easy to obtain mutual benefits; these will undoubtedly be different in nature, but valuable for both parties. Providing the universities in the country with

an integral outreach program is currently a fundamental feature in the transformation of the Higher Education System (ANUIES, 2000a). Likewise, it is necessary that the IES elaborate studies concerning society's perception of their institutions, which should go beyond the scenographic or advertising aspects and, should take into account their image in relation with their social relevance, as well as the perception society has of this relevance, in order for them to be in the best conditions to satisfy the demands of the external sectors as far as outreach is concerned.

In Mexico, the state policies concerning science and technology have always been the framework in which the outreach concept has been developed between the IES and the enterprises. Three moments can be generally distinguished within that process: the first one covers from 1970 to 1980, and a model sustained on the authority of the academic elite can be identified in it; the second moment is found between 1980 and 1988, and it can be observed that it is ruled by a model in which the authority of the state bureaucracy predominates; the third moment starts towards the end of the eighties and stretches over the first few years of the following decade and it is seen as being oriented by a model of market integration. A fourth period is in the process of being defined at present, its main characteristics would be a sort of bringing together of enterprise, university and government; a market orientation, a strong participation of the academic community and a standardization coming from the government and determined precisely by it (Casas, 1999). In this stage, these three aspects would converge towards a full development of knowledge.

According to the above chronology, it is possible to distinguish three periods through which the private sector view has passed concerning the public university, with the resulting effects in the outreach and formulating of policies related to the production of knowledge. One first stage would be covering up until the middle of the eighties, and it would be characterized by going from ignorance to ideological conflict; towards the end of the eighties; a second stage would be in the late eighties, which is characterized by cooperative disposition; and the third stage, would be placed in the nineties and would be distinguished by the search for specific outreach mechanisms (Luna, 1999).

It can be observed that a change begins to be registered in the relationships between Mexican universities and enterprises. These relationships are being increased, diversified and promoted by both parties, which has led to refer to such change as a new social contract between the academy and society (Casas & De Gortari, 1999). This has awakened a legitimate concern in the developing countries, which are currently setting forth the need of schools and institutions to become open organizations, with horizontal interaction in each type and vertical between types and levels, and linked with both the national and international scene, so they can show thus, their potential as an innovating change force. Only under these conditions society will assume education as a matter that concerns it directly; it will be organized and will participate actively and responsibly, contributing opinions that can nurture decision making in the different educational

ambits. At the same time, this will allow higher education to position itself as a fundamental development element (Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP], 2001).

Outreach as a means to achieve positioning

In spite of the fact that its importance has been acknowledged, outreach among the IES and the various sectors of society is still scarce, which has proved to be a detriment both of society's appraisal of this type of education, as well as of the identification of collaboration opportunities. The challenge lies in establishing appropriate outlines for a greater participation of society in their development that will strengthen its outreach channels with society and the adjoining environment, to which end the National Education Program (*Programa Nacional de Educación*) 2001-2006 (SEP, 2001) proposes in a particular way:

- To improve coordination, social consultation and participation mechanisms, ensuring the relationship between all the sectors of society and the IES.
- To create the Outreach Consultation Councils for higher education, whose purpose will be to gather in a systematic way the opinion of the productive and social sectors in order to enhance the policies established by the authorities and institutions in charge of coordinating higher education.
- To encourage the innovation and exchange of successful outreach experiences in higher education.

The program stems from the goals and strategies of the National Development Plan 2001-2006 (*Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2001-2006*, PND for its Spanish acronym) and it takes into account the complexity of the change in education that needs to be undertaken so that the country can ensure it sustainable growth (SEP, 2001).

Among the current activities carried out by the IES to achieve the goals which they have been entrusted with, those directed towards reinforcing the links between the social and productive sectors acquire greater relevance, since they permit to grasp with greater clarity the real needs of the society they serve. This attitude has enabled the IES to increase their sensitivity concerning the dynamics of the economical and social events registered in Mexico as well as in the rest of the world, with the ensuing advantage that it represents a greater social relevance and, therefore, a better positioning and an ever greater strengthening of the image society has of the IES.

In this sense, outreach–as has been defined above–stands in a privileged situation as a means for the public IES to position themselves socially as institutions generating not only professionals, but also knowledge and proposals useful for development, by accepting the transformation challenge that the current reality imposes on them.

However, it is necessary to place the concepts of image and positioning beyond a traditional marketing definition, and to understand that *image* refers to an internal and external perception of the institution and its functions (Moliner, 1999); that is, the actions through which it fulfills its mission. On the other hand, *positioning* refers to the placing of the institution within a determined context, which, in this case, is the society it serves. It is convenient to add that positioning begins with getting to know the institution and it does not refer to the institution itself, but to that which, in the mind of the individual, is achieved through it. For that reason, the concept generated in the receptor is far more important than the concept expressed by the emitter. This is why the mental framework of the person who refers to the institution or hears about it, propitiates the positioning of that institution within the social context (Ries & Trout, 1999).

The concepts mentioned above have been approached differently between public and private higher education. In the first case, public higher education has been taken into consideration only through national programs or through the initiative of the educational institutions themselves and the results have favored only certain IES within the national context, as has been shown within the Public Universities and Kindred Related Institutions Council (*Consejo de Universidades Públicas e Instituciones Afines*), in the sense that despite the achievements obtained by the public IES during the last few years, their image has deteriorated to a greater or lesser degree, instead of gaining a better positioning as higher level institutions, due to the various types of conflicts they are facing (ANUIES, 2000b).

In the case of private institutions, their foremost strategy has been centered in the permanent promotion of their image in relation with a marketing plan that encourages and urges a competitive atmosphere which, in turn, allows it to improve and renew itself (Guttman, 2002). In addition, private IES are subjected to a continuous scrutiny by parents, who can penalize them by withdrawing the students in case the institution does not account for its actions in a satisfactory way.

The possibility of making this responsibility effective in public schools does not exist, a difference which is crystal clear to the great majority of parents. By no mere chance, there has been a strong tendency at an official level to grant the so-called *education check*, which the parents can use to pay for education in institutions with good benchmark (Tooley, 2002). This has generated a constant development of marketing strategies, which have an impact not only on private IES, but on the public ones as well, as it unleashes a competition to interact with society sectors with a market focus.

In this sense, outreach acquires a new characteristic, different from the ones that have defined and conceptualized it in the traditional way. That is, besides acting as a link and as an instrument of interaction and mutual benefit between the IES and the social and productive sectors, it encourages institutional pertinence, enhances society's recognition of the university, improves its image and, as a result, its institutional positioning within the environment it serves.

Conclusions

From what has been explained herein, it can be said that the changes in the economy, the new military and economical leaderships, and the proposals for new paradigms brought about by globalization have motivated the social transformations, which have had an impact on higher education. This, along with the lack of financial resources in the governments to support education, with the changes in the technological and educational models, which are based on lifelong learning, with a more diversified job world, where there is greater competition and new requirements in skills, abilities and knowledge, has forced the IES to search for new strategies that will enable them to face these challenges adequately.

The outreach of the IES with the social and productive sectors has turned out to be one of the most important strategies to respond to these challenges, as it allows them to cater for the requirements of those sectors, to feedback their academic functions as far as quality and pertinence are concerned, and to obtain additional resources to attenuate their budgetary needs.

Among the great variety of concepts concerning outreach, two conceptual approaches stand out: one that considers only the productive sector (entrepreneurial or industrial) and that has had an impact mainly in the north-west international ambit; and another one that integrates the social sector, including the different government levels, and wherein Latin America has made important contributions.

Facing the demands for collaboration not only with society, but among themselves as well, the IES' position has changed from having a reductionist concept, limited to certain types of outreach actions, to one of openness with a broad spectrum of possibilities in response to the worldwide economical tendencies.

The new scheme of competition generated by the aforementioned transformations places public universities in a scenario that was unknown until now. Their re-positioning within the social and productive contexts has now become a necessity.

New elements are now arising in public universities that had not been exploited before with the intensity demanded by the market–encouraging cooperation, coordination, advising, promotion, institutional image and social participation mechanisms–and that cause an impact in the institution's positioning within its context.

Outreach can become an efficacious instrument for university promotion by establishing an interaction of mutual understanding with the various sectors, in order to make the perception of its image to be in harmony with its reality.

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