

THE INTEGRITY OF ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES

Quality measurement and the goals to be achieved by universities in the different areas of academic activity, defined after the requirements established by government agencies, together with the growing demands in the practice of the different disciplines, have led some universities to establish marked distinctions between the work carried out in undergraduate and graduate teaching, research and extension. The activities in these areas are hence treated in a segmented fashion, instead of doing it in an integral manner.

The purposes of measurement and the search for ease in the verification of objectives and goals can lead to the design of instruments and mechanisms in which the totality is overtaken by the specific or partial perspective that involves every demand in a given area. Such instruments and mechanisms can produce a fragmentation of activities in order to answer specific questions, losing the global and integrative perspective.

In Latin America there are institutions that declare to be fundamentally teaching establishments and, there are teachers whose only relevant activity is undergraduate teaching. In Chile, for instance, where only a small proportion of the universities are accredited in research and graduate studies, this has become ever more common. However, in the knowledge society the university system cannot give up its universal and integrative essence, which refers to the training of highly qualified human capital, and the creation and diffusion of advanced knowledge.

In fact, in its vital layout, academic activity is universal and integrative. In the first place, because teaching at both undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as research, should be carried out in a global context. This implies that advanced undergraduate and graduate training, as well as the creation of new knowledge, are not carried out with the only reference of the immediate environment, but with that of the whole; that is, professionals and graduates are trained for the world.

In the second place, it is vital because it is not separable, except to reach a better understanding or specific measurement. This is, the academic activity arises and feeds in the interaction and joint action of students and teachers, in the dialogue between peers and, above all, in the central fact that every academic activity permeates the others and are built together, invigorating reciprocally.

In summary, the current knowledge society requires academics oriented to continuous learning, with a permanent focus on research and knowledge updating in favor of a teaching activity that adds value for the student.

There is no doubt that the graduate level is an indispensable source for research and that the two activities strengthen undergraduate training. An undergraduate program without teachers who carry out research is technical training rather than university education, at the time that it becomes very difficult to achieve high productivity standards in a research area without a consolidated graduate program. Although there are quality institutions where undergraduate teaching predominates, there is in them a higher level of academic achievement at levels that are not of high magnitude but reach significant standards in graduate training and research.

In turn, in this century a university teacher cannot do without an intellectual preparedness that allows to integrally perform all the activities inherent to academia. A university professor that is not prepared to perform graduate teaching or research, cannot easily teach at undergraduate level with a reasonable degree of quality.

Within the frame of widespread higher education, the examples of institutions that define themselves as exclusively teaching ones and provide low quality teaching are not rare in Latin America. Teachers hired by the hour without any other duty than to teach a class, lack of appropriate library material, absence of infrastructure and laboratories, are all realities with the principal risk of promising students a teaching of a quality that will not be accomplished and that will hinder their social mobility and successful insertion in the labor market.

Academia is complex, demanding and dynamic. Its activities are inseparable and they are all linked. Therefore, to deal with academic activities in an integral fashion is not only a strategic imperative, but an ethical requirement to accomplish the essential roles and goals of a university inserted in the knowledge society.

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