

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN A NEW CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are often impacted by macro changes as well as changes specific to the educational field, which force them to reflect on their core mission, adapting it to current times, and redefining their orientation in relation to their traditional role.

In this context, the globalization of the economy and new political, financial, social, cultural, environmental, technological and labor challenges, accelerated by COVID-19 pandemic, have led universities to adapt to the changing conditions of the surroundings.

The educational field has experienced many changes: changes in regulations, growth and diversification of HEIs, increased in educational demand, expansion of university programs, massification of higher education, budget cuts, demand for quality control, the rapid spread of information and communication technologies, educational innovations and innovations in governance. Additionally, the growing importance of national and international rankings as indicators of university quality, academic consortia, a greater territorial distribution of university programs, and free education proposals combined with government support to finance higher education have emerged as key trends.

Moreover, there is an international trend toward a more heterogeneous student population, which forces universities to change the way they teach academic programs, incorporating non-conventional modalities that represent an opportunity to promote equality and inclusion. Students now demand an education that addresses their business and productive challenges, while universities have increasingly recognized that education must focus on the progressive development of students' knowledge and skills, given that both society and the market require professionals with new skills, as well as new roles for HEIs.

Access to higher education has a positive impact on society by fostering economic growth and enhancing the labor force, as well as on individuals by promoting student mobility. Universities must, therefore, balance their educational quality with equality and students' outcomes in terms of employment. They face the challenge of revising not only their management models and teaching-learning methods, but also their connection to society and communities.

In addition, universities compete to attract and retain students, responding to new dynamics and constantly innovating and adapting their academic offerings. They are expected to adjust to the changing environment, be marketing-oriented, and rank among the most recognized institutions in the world. Moreover, there is an internal demand to improve the processes of teaching, research, and extension, based on the premise that these processes must be oriented toward solving the economic, social, and environmental problems in the areas where they are located.

In this line, they are adapting their governance structures to accommodate more flexible and dynamic models to deal with permanent changes. Universities aim to achieve optimal performance, social and academic prestige, and generate income, while striving to maintain their leadership and sources of competitive advantage. They also implement strategies to differentiate their programs based on higher levels of quality, social responsibility, and commitment to sustainability.

The change in their approach is not only relevant for higher education but also for countries' educational systems and development, as society needs trained human capital to solve the immediate challenges of a fast-changing world. The diversification of programs and student populations favors economic and productive development, while reducing inequality gaps, since access to higher education is no longer restrictive.

In sum, the combination of educational quality and inclusion to satisfy the demands of the labor market will require a focus on technological innovation, lifelong learning, professional updating, faculty commitment, and the ongoing international exchange of content, management experiences, and evaluation criteria.

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