

UNIVERSITIES' REPUTATION

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Juan Manuel Mora

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II. REPUTATION, QUALITY AND SUCCESS IN EDUCATION

Concepción Naval

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1. INTRODUCTION

The university has an important role to play in society and must respond to the expectations placed on it. It has a social and cultural function and is a key factor for the generation of knowledge and for development in general (Delors; Tobarra). At times, therefore, certain issues or reforms that affect the direction and role of the University in society need to be rethought.

In this regard, UNESCO, following a World Conference on Higher Education in the 21st century, drafted a declaration underscoring the mission of higher education and a framework for action.

Among the objectives are included (art. 1):

1. Promoting the mission of contributing to sustainable development and the improvement of society.
2. Training highly qualified and responsible citizens who actively participate in society.
3. Providing appropriate measures and expertise to contribute to cultural, social and economic development.
4. Ensure the transmission to young people of those values that are the basis of democratic citizenship.

What stands out most clearly in this statement is the continual reference to the social function of the university, together with the mission to promote, develop and disseminate knowledge through research and increasing interdisciplinarity. This sheds light on the major challenges contemporary higher education faces

today –quality internationalization and service to society (Tünnermann and De Souza)– that have been highlighted in various international documents.

At this particular time, I will focus on one of these aspects, specifically the aspect concerned with the quality of education as it is perceived today in terms of reputation, before ultimately proposing a decalogue of the elements of which this academic excellence might be comprised, along with a reflection on the consequences these may have for the governance of universities.

2. THE DEBATE SURROUNDING REPUTATION

As Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez claim¹, over the last three decades, both the public and academic spheres have witnessed a renewed interest in the question of reputation in higher education institutions, although the issue can be traced back much further:

The governments are concerned about whether or not the universities of their countries are among the top positions of the international rankings on reputation. The academics use these positions as a quality index of the university systems. The leaders of universities incorporate the management of both the image and reputation of their universities into their tasks, many of them involved in a growing competition for attracting students (and their fees), professors and resources for research. The professors with the most academic and research ambitions aspire to carry out their work in the institutions with the best reputations (“Appendix” 89).

If we ask ourselves what are the most important factors for understanding the concept of university reputation and its emergence in public discussion, we can probably point to two:

[O]n the one hand, the transformations in which many systems of higher education are immersed and which head them into a line of greater competition among universities; and on the other hand, the availability of a new tool for measuring reputation, that of university rankings, widely used by the participants of the public debate on universities (“Appendix” 89).

There are many reasons why competition has escalated between universities, forcing them to attract more and better students, faculty members and funding. I will mention only two: first, the lack –or rather, the decline– in public funding; and secondly, the rules that apply to research fund distribution.

¹ Throughout this section I follow the line of argument these authors present in their position paper.

If the universities have to increasingly compete amongst themselves, they have to understand how they are being perceived by the publics that are relevant to that competition, meaning the students, the professors, the private and public financing bodies, and the rest of the universities. This means that they must concern themselves with their reputation, building it up and maintaining it (“Appendix” 91).

It should be recalled here that studies on university reputation first emerged from lines of research into the strategies employed by organizations sometime around 1990. These focused primarily on companies, and, in particular, on marketing studies and corporate image research and studies (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka; Standifird).

But, it seems that recently there is a notable rise in the number of experts who study reputation in areas such as:

- Economics of education, making use of the rankings in their quantitative analyses (Mackelo and Druteikiene; Portera and Toutkoushian; Tao);
- Sociology of education (Strathdee);
- Studies on higher education in general, a field in which there is a great deal of interest (Bowman and Bastedo; Sung and Yang; Sweitzer and Volkwein; Van Vught; Volkwein and Grunig; Volkwein and Sweitzer).

However, the logic of competition is not the only way possible, neither in the government, nor in the university. The Theory of Games, for example, shows how a better understanding of competitive situations has evolved from one of its principal contributions to strategic management, mainly because it has promoted better systems for structuring problems.

This would involve placing the emphasis on a cooperative, rather than a competitive vision, by identifying the players involved, the added value that each player represents, the rules of the game, the tactics employed, and the scope of the game. This should, ultimately, help to provide a more global view.

Let us return to the debate on reputation: the variety of audiences, settings and fields of research are reflected in a wide range of elements or components. Each of these aspects refers to the multiple functions that the university can fulfill, including the specific issues arising from each of these functions, as well as the conditions in which these functions are met.

Thus, a university may have a good reputation as an institution that prepares well-trained professionals for future employment, carries out first-class research, provides general or liberal education for their students, and contributes towards the development of a more civic and responsible society, among other functions.

Research studies that focus on a complex approach to university reputation have to study two sets of factors in order to explain the evaluations made by different audiences when considering reputation.

- On the one hand, attention must be given to objective factors, i.e., those that reflect the reality of the higher education institution in question, as much as possible.
- On the other hand, they have to consider subjective factors that regulate the interests, expectations and perceptions of those who make the judgments.

In today's educational world, this dual perspective opens the door to an interesting dilemma between objective and perceived quality and invites us to look at the third point that I would like to discuss, and which could be framed as follows: the culture of quality and the culture of success.

3. CULTURE OF QUALITY AND CULTURE OF SUCCESS

Here we encounter three interwoven concepts: success, quality and excellence (Naval).

No one is blind to the consequences that emerge from establishing success at the heart of education, either from imagining that the purpose of education is to succeed in life and interpreting success from a purely economic or technological perspective, or from the simple and strict acceptance of proposals, ideas and concrete actions.

In the culture in which we live, it is a widely shared belief that success is one of the essential purposes of education. It is also commonly believed that quality and success, the latter conceived as triumph, are one and the same. Thus it follows that academic, emotional and professional successes are pursued when searching for higher levels of quality in education.

I propose that in order to rescue the best from the culture of quality within education, we need to offer a vision of quality in education that differs from what is usually referred to as "personal quality".

The Royal Spanish Academy dictionary defines success as the outcome of a positive business transaction or performance. A second definition considers success as the acceptance of someone or something. And finally, a third definition would be a satisfactory end or completion of a business transaction.

If we consider the etymology of the Spanish word for success, *éxito*, we encounter a voice taken from the Latin *exire*, meaning "out", which is formed by *ex* "out" and *ire* "to go". From this, only the positive sense was retained as it evolved: the "happy end" or "successful outcome" of a business endeavour. In English, however, the word "exit" retained its original Latin sense: to leave.

Therefore in Spanish, *tener éxito* means "to succeed"; it is synonymous with success. The opposite is *fracasar*, or "to fail".

Quality, which is so eagerly pursued by our culture, is directly linked to success, which in turn is understood as a social category. It is accepted that something has quality if it is successful, although it should be rather the reverse: success is –must be– a result of quality.

Quality is objective: it occurs when something is good, that is, when it fulfills the requirements of what classical culture referred to as the “essence” or “mode of being” of a thing. A good pen, for example, is one that writes well. In the case of human activity it refers to “good work”: a good manager, a good lawyer, a good teacher are all deemed as such because they meet the demands of their job.

One should not disregard public opinion, which generally accepts what is good but can sometimes misjudge what is truly valuable, particularly when taking other considerations into account, such as convenience, self-interest, etc.

Confusing quality with success would be an error; just as encouraging quality to be dependent on success makes no sense, and turns the world on its head. This is a social emotional view of success which implies confusion between quality and quantity: whatever sells the best, gets the most views, receives the most votes then becomes the best.

A third term in use is “excellence”. Something is excellent when it stands out from the ordinary. This encompasses either “a way of being” or “a way of doing”, as in conduct. Something is also said to be excellent if it works well. It suggests a maximum degree of quality that is not measured by success. Excellence and quality are terms that, in practice, are used interchangeably; to speak of something excellent is to emphasize the importance of quality and give it greater prominence.

3.1. The study of quality and reputation as perceived quality

However, we may proceed to ask: Is the conscientious search for tangible results, and their consideration as a sign of quality, sensible or not? Are the results obtained by this more or less obsessive pursuit not somehow false? Do they not tend to contaminate the necessary detachment inherent in science or innovation? Do we run the risk of subjecting everything to the end result and dismissing all that precedes it?

Let us assume for the moment that quality aims to produce results (success), and that these may be qualified as being excellent. To “redeem” this pursuit of results we must be aware that:

- they are an absolutely necessary requirement for the survival of an organization,
- they imply the need for a process to sustain them,
- they represent proof that quality criteria have been taken into account in the process.

This is why quality involves the whole system (Donabedian).

Quality, therefore, is an attribute inherent in any activity, and demands the intention of carrying out what is appropriate or desirable.

People who study quality have been using different components within each activity, grouping them by virtue of their role and impact on the end result, and in turn, this has led to a new science: the study of quality. Nevertheless, the study of quality offers a methodology that can be applied to other sciences. Quality criteria can provide direction to companies and help to define what good performance is. Let us focus on how quality is often perceived in education.

4. QUALITY IN EDUCATION

Interest concerning quality in education arises when it is no longer necessary to worry about quantity (Quintana 156-65). Quality is not a new concept; essentially it suggests something that is inherent in education itself: an intentional path towards improvement, excellence or perfection.

However, following the research carried out by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983, which was created in order to meet two clearly perceived problems: the loss of both competitiveness in business, and integration in American society, the word “quality” began to be applied in the U.S. on a much larger scale. The root of the problem was the poor state of education; therefore it became necessary to promote quality in education.

This idea spread to many countries; it was endorsed by the OECD, where meetings and proposals were organized to ensure quality in education. Today it is a popular topic, some would argue that there is too much talk about quality, but generally it is presented as a particular challenge for educational systems.

The European Union refers to quality in education for the first time in the Maastricht Treaty stating that the “Community shall contribute to the development of quality education”.

In Spain, the use of the word quality in reference to education dates back to 1972.

Identifying quality with elitist approaches to education in a superficial and offensive way is a common cliché. But in my opinion, true quality in education does not enter into conflict with equity and justice. Those who believe otherwise are usually thinking more about educational systems, with the limitation that this implies, than in education from a personal perspective.

What is very clear is that the concern for quality arose at the end of the late 20th century within a competitive economic context, and that, as a result, organizations were created in order to monitor and evaluate teaching.

This notion of quality in education can be fundamentally understood (Quintana 157-60) in two ways: in a sociopolitical sense (relating to the quality of the educational system), and in a fully educational sense (the actual quality of education, in the personal and social sense).

In the first case it refers to the aims, organizational skills and general management of the educational system; that is, with the external or structural features. In the second, however, it addresses the essence of teaching and education: the personal fulfillment and type of training that is promoted and achieved through educational performance.

In this second sense, quality involves promoting self-improvement beyond the achievement measured by external quality indicators –all of which may be necessary or desirable however insufficient in order to measure quality in the radical sense– as these indicators can be easily manipulated.

4.1. The purpose of education and personal quality

What we have said makes more sense when we consider that the aim of education is received from the object upon which it acts. Simultaneously, it is the goal towards which it is directed. Therein lies the quality of educational performance: it can only be defined as the wellbeing of the person who is being educated (Altarejos 19).

Understanding the end result has become extremely problematic in our modern world. Nevertheless, the beginning of understanding of every human action lies in the knowledge of its conclusion; of where we are going and what our motivations are. If we aim to address quality in education, we cannot focus on processes, products, and structures; we need to direct our attention towards the person.

I propose, therefore, that we consider the main elements that make up quality, ten key points that represent the battles, challenges or improvements that university excellence needs to cover today. The decalogue includes three inherent objectives relevant to universities, followed by six ways to achieve them and, finally, a tool for leverage.

5. TEN CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN THE UNIVERSITY

I suggest ten battles (be it proposals for change, challenges, areas for improvement, or obstacles, etc.) because quality or excellence cannot be something static or final that is ultimately achieved, but rather a complicated dynamic balance, always facing success or failure. This is why the quest for excellence which manifests itself in a university's reputation and quality, or perceived quality, is a necessary requirement for university governance.

First, the three objectives, or goals:

1. *Excellence in teaching*: this includes a variety of elements worth considering, such as how to choose, promote and certify teachers, how to measure internationalization; promote educational innovation; improve the quality of teaching materials; include ICTs, and if so, supervise their correct use; MOOCs; how to reflect on the role of technology in teaching and the time spent by students on campus with a view to improving education; or how to increase international placements. It is obvious, at least in the statements of principles, that excellence in teaching should encourage a broad, diverse and thorough education for students. It presupposes individual attention to students, which covers both academic and future professional recruitment advice (with the practicum, for example). It integrates processes to improve awareness, detection and planning that serves to promote equality, inclusiveness and democratic values through teaching and academic life. Maintaining an appropriate balance of certified teachers with experience and junior teachers is a delicate task, which requires foresight and skillful governance.
2. *Excellence in research*: this can be achieved inter alia through the strength of consolidated groups; participation in funded R+D+i projects; collaboration in European and international projects; and quality publications in national and international journals.
3. *Excellence in the transfer of knowledge*: this is the so-called third mission of the university which is encompassed in the university's dual socio-cultural and economic roles. It touches issues such as university access and tuition fees, but is also present, for example, in Service-Learning projects where students are offered the opportunity to link the subjects they are studying with projects that serve the broader community. This transfer requires closer connections to the labor market –the necessary and overused term: employability (Laker, Naval and Mrnjajs)–, but also to social causes, i.e., promoting social responsibility, fostering a healthy sense of citizenship, as

well as collaborating for the common good. To use a simple image, universities should be regarded as spaces for citizenship and social commitment.

Let us now focus on the six ways I propose for achieving the objectives outlined above:

4. *Differentiation.* Even when presupposing the pursuit of excellence in these three dimensions, it is still vital to be excellent in some unique area. As they say in the Anglo-Saxon world: distinctiveness. You cannot be excellent at everything. It is necessary to have a truly unique project that relates to the identity and mission of the institution, on which you can build your brand; something truly connected to the identity and mission of the institution.
 5. *Funding.* The current economic climate dictates the need to obtain essential public and private funding which permits the university to have an adequate infrastructure for teaching, as well as crucial provisions for research projects.
 6. *Participation.* Collective projects –and a university is a collective project– requires the involvement of all its members. Therefore, in order to achieve quality, it is vital to generate a sense of belonging, among students and teachers, administrative and service staff, graduates and alumni. This involves creating a stimulating work environment for teachers, a place where they can develop their vocations and ideals.
 7. *Communication.* Strategic management of internal and external communication is another increasingly important task in universities. This involves internal and external transparency, public information, accountability, and participation in social debates.
 8. *Networking.* Another important aspect involves maintaining excellent international and national relationships. Excellent universities participate in networks and even form national or regional “university systems” that recognize the value they bring to society as a whole; this implies an open and cooperative spirit.
 9. *Open to the environment.* This last item includes, among other things, activities that extend beyond the university. This is consistent with the proposal that has been highlighted on numerous occasions by international organizations: to enable lifelong learning for all citizens.
- This brings us to the final means, the “gear shift” (the tenth challenge):
10. *Governance.* Professional, efficient, and participative governance is crucial in order to achieve the desired standards of quality. In an environment where decisions are made, leadership is exercised, and ultimately, responsibility is assumed, much is at stake. As in all organizations, those who govern have the duty of directing the means towards the end to which they aspire.

The three missions (1, 2 and 3) come first. The rest is the framework that makes everything else possible: the means to carry them out.

Everything has a purpose if it contributes to the development of the university's mission, and in accordance, its presence in the university is justified. This would be a useful approach for understanding and explaining many other realities surrounding universities, such as the role of rating agencies, or evaluation questionnaires, to name but two.

The key points also refer to something we mentioned at the beginning: taking the different aspects and stakeholders into account, the idea of multiple reputations is important, and runs parallel to multiple qualities, whether we refer to teaching, research, or the transfer of knowledge.

In closing, I would like to draw your attention to a reality that might be strange in some contemporary university environments, but which I think is worth considering: the effects that all of the above have on the ordinary day to day governance of universities.

6. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE GOVERNANCE OF UNIVERSITIES

Ultimately, the people responsible for governance and decision-making are the ones who can direct these means towards the desired end. This requires someone with a broad vision and the ability to take charge, someone who will not be discouraged and overcome the initial inertia in order to focus properly on the university's initiatives and meet these challenges.

The three pillars that support universities –teaching, research, and transfer of knowledge– exist in a fertile, complementary but fragile tension; a breach would lead to the replacement of universities by cluster of schools, research centers, cultural observatories, business appendices, etc.

How do we avoid this breach? By strengthening the constitutional activity around which university life revolves, and which ultimately marks the historic rhythm of this institution –i.e., knowledge– (González).

If we submit the current governance of universities to an X-ray, it is likely that in the background we will find some biased views of governance (Gonzalez):

- on the one hand, a technocratic vision exists that places its faith in social engineering as a panacea to solve all human problems;
- and on the other, an approach where excessive importance is given to image management.

Both are partial views which should not be confused with making wise and prudent decisions.

These dysfunctions progressively dehumanize governance, leading ultimately to excessive regulatory procedures: this is an inevitable solution which is used to deal with problems when the underlying principles lack clarity.

Placing importance on discourse aims precisely to broaden the space for the discussion that precedes decision, but it would be misleading to think that procedure or discourse alone can replace the responsibility of deciding (Gonzalez).

7. CONCLUSIONS

There are still many open questions to which future research must respond. I have specifically made reference to issues relating to the worldwide reputation of the university.

I have not attempted to provide conclusive answers to the various questions raised, nor would I attempt to do so; we still do not have a sufficient body of research. Rather, I have tried to raise some of the main points of discussion and offer some criteria for evaluating possible responses. My aim is to make the discussion more worthwhile, both for the different university communities as well as the governing bodies at each university.

Using these reflections on the reputation of the university as a starting point, I would be truly gratified if these pages contributed to advancing a conversation as to how our universities can cooperate in order to prepare students to be well-informed and motivated citizens, equipped with a strong critical sense, capable of analyzing society's problems, looking for solutions and accepting social responsibility.

No one is concealing the reality we face as our point of departure, or what we see in our society and youth, but we must confirm our claim that universities contribute in many ways towards raising civic awareness and have a notable impact on issues relating to coexistence and social cohesion.

Institutions that are devoted to the provision of knowledge cannot help but clash with a society that expects instant results. Even so, the university cannot renounce its mission. It would be wise to maintain its efforts to promote civic awareness, coexistence and social cohesion; in short, to truly deserve the reputation for quality that it aspires to.