

ARTICLE

University Extension. Problem Identification and Guidance for Managing the Area*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the topic of university extension. It draws on a combination of academic experiences (graduate projects, publications, conference papers, course delivery, research and experience in managing the area). Given the brevity of the article, its aim is to provide guidance on identifying the problems and potential courses of action associated with university extension, an area that comes up against a number of obstacles despite being very present in higher education discourse. Among these are limited training offerings, which mean that university extension is learnt through practice, a rather pragmatic approach that has a weak methodological and epistemological basis. These elements hinder the development of projects for running the area.

Keywords

third function of higher education, university extension, running and managing the area

Extensión universitaria. Problematización y orientaciones para gestionar el área

Resumen

El siguiente trabajo aborda la temática de la extensión universitaria. Deriva de conjugar experiencias de producciones académicas (trabajos de posgrado, publicaciones, presentaciones en congresos, dictado de cursos, investigación y experiencia de gestión sobre el área). El objetivo es, dado que es un artículo breve, brindar orientaciones respecto a su problematización a partir de señalar las posibles líneas de acción en una función que tiene bastante presencia en el discurso universitario, pero que

* This article is an adaptation of material supplied to political groups that, just before the elections, asked for a text that would provide input in order to table the debate on this area's platforms and management proposals. It was well received and offered reasonable guidance. Its publication, therefore, seemed to be a logical step in terms of broadening the reach of a small contribution and raising awareness of how university extension is represented in different parts of the world.

se encuentra con obstáculos como las pocas ofertas de formación, lo que conlleva acciones bastante pragmáticas en que la extensión se aprende a través de la práctica y con una base epistemológica y metodológica débil; elementos, estos, que dificultan elaborar proyectos para la conducción del área.

Palabras clave

tercera función de la universidad, extensión universitaria, conducción y gestión del área

1. The University Extension Organiser's Role and a Stance Proposal

In current higher education discourse, in Latin America at least, there is broad consensus that a university's identity should be founded on three core functions: research, teaching and university extension,¹ or other equivalent ones. I shall refer to university extension as the "third function", in keeping with what other authors have defined as the "third mission" (Bueno Campos, 2007). It is the latest term to be incorporated into higher education to overcome the obstacle of the variety of terms used to refer to different concepts (something that I shall deal with below). The common denominator of the third function is that it is based on the need for a more or less immediate and direct articulation between higher education and the intra and/or extra-university community, with concepts that vary in relation to society, higher education, the role that higher education should play in social development, and the content and forms that intervene in such articulation. The recent history of university extension and the concepts associated with it (Quiroga, 1999; Tünnermann, 2000; Brusilovsky, 2000; Buchbinder 2005, López, 2009) show that the organiser's role does not fall solely within the domain of public higher education; it also falls within the domain of the private sector and other fields like health and the rural environment (indeed, most of the literature is from this sector²). Conceptually speaking, however, it can indeed be asserted that there is considerable agreement on three constant, fundamental elements: 1) the play between know-how and knowledge,

2) in which, at some time or other, professionals and technicians get involved, and that 3) it is carried out predominantly with social sectors and organisations (subjects) rather than with individual subjects, who are the recipients-beneficiaries of these interventions that have varying degrees of institutionalisation.

Even though the growth in the number of approaches to the third function as an object of knowledge over the last decade has possibly had an impact on the fact that the organiser's role – the relevance of which stems from its potential impact on social development for both research and teaching – is now being taken more seriously, it still has a fairly weak epistemological and methodological basis (La Rocca, Issel, 2006). This is an obstacle for identifying lines of work and stances, including the management of the area, though there is some reference literature that allows the theoretical-practical relationship of this issue to be articulated and advances to be made on the topic. For extension, the path is usually a pragmatic one. Consequently, it is often practice that leads to theory (the practice of agents, lecturers, area managers, etc.). From the point of view of theory, there is little integral material that leads to the practice of running and/or managing extension areas. A number of academic works refer to some partial attempts to deal with the topic. Of these, we would highlight: first, documents, generally regulatory resolutions and reports from national universities and their agencies, which organise and specify the activity's objectives and scope and define the role and functions of extension agents, etc.; second, proposals referring mainly to the evaluation of the function, such as documents (in Argentina, CONEAU [National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation]) referring to self-evaluation and evaluation

1. The reason why I am going to give preference to the term "extension" is historic; it is the one that has generally tended to prevail in Latin American higher education discourse.

2. (under production) *Extensión y educación superior. Catálogo regional de bibliografía 2010*. Given that this is a list of publications dealing with extension and the field associated with it in general (so far up to 300 titles sorted by country), a large amount of material was ruled out. This material referred to specific experiences on the topic of extension, where it was found that most of the works came from the rural environment field.

in universities that include extension, or works that propose taxonomies for types, dimensions and/or indicators that should be considered in terms of both results and preparatory instruction for the evaluation of extension (Aponte, 2004; Gorri & Roccaro, 2006) and; third, as a source of guidance, university websites containing pages and links to the extension section, with elements that are sometimes inspiring for the running of the area.

2. Concepts of the Third Function of Higher Education

When a person or a team of professionals plans or is appointed to take on senior management functions and assumes – because it is there and because they consider it relevant – what I have provisionally and generically termed “the third function of higher education”, it is necessary to identify, specify and distinguish the main concepts of it in order to highlight the underlying ideological and epistemological hypotheses that provide the basis for the objectives of a policy for the area. A lack of awareness in this regard can often lead to projects that contain significant contradictions (ultimately, if eclectic stances are taken, then this should be done knowingly).

There is a classic concept of extension that has a wide spectrum of technical-professional assistance and social and cultural management functions, with a predominantly unidirectional communication model (Freire, 1973; Brusilovsky, 2000; Pacheco, 2004), in which the emitter is the higher education subject that develops diagnostics, identifies problems and ways to solve them, and takes decisions for a passive recipient-beneficiary.

According to López (2005, p. 19), when, for example, higher education takes on the role of promoting health, sport, art, recreation and culture in general, it also takes on the role of sending messages to the general public about what is healthy, sportingly good, artistically appreciable, recreationally desirable and culturally promotable. Through this rhetoric, consideration is given to what should or should not be done in certain subjects and what is in good or bad taste, often outside the competency areas of faculties and with a strong connotation of class.

There are versions of this model that are more conservative (anchored in maintaining the status quo) or more democratising and progressive (proposing that the former be overcome, such as the one stemming from the 1918 Argentinean University Reform, although they do not allow a paternalistic, assistentialistic view to be shared).

We find a transferistic concept (Ávila & Martínez, 2006; Carballo, 2002; Carosio, 1999; Dominic, 2006; Llomovatte, Nairdof & Pereyra, 2004 and 2009) that, with a model similar to the previous one in terms of the definition and roles of the stakeholders involved, restrict their actions to updating certain sectors of society through a process of transferring contributions made by research projects, once they – or one of their stages – have been completed. It presupposes that after a piece of knowledge has been produced, some type of impact or return on the environment immediately or mediately occurs to contribute to its development. In certain cases, extension is separated from transfer, which limits the former to social and cultural management or assistentialistic actions (CONEAU, 1999).

We also find a connectionistic³ extension concept, which, in principle, is defined as a model of communication and decision-making similar to the previous ones and has precedents in the old North American concept. It is founded on technological technical assistance focusing on productive development. However, a recycled, updated version began to take a firm hold in the 1990s (Avaro & Iglesias, 2001; De Nicola & Pidello, 2002; Lombera & Belmonte, 2007; Cruz, 2002). Under the research and development (R&D) motto, the recipient subject was incorporated into it, in the definition of objectives and decision-making. In exchange, universities had to become involved in securing resources to provide such assistance. This has been seen as a covert tendency towards privatisation, since these resources can be used to make cutbacks on State funding of the higher education budget. A document illustrating the foundations of this position in Argentina is Act 23.877/90 for the promotion and development of technological innovation.

The obstacles represented by these ways of conceiving extension and of connecting higher education with society were observed in the 1960s and 1970s by left-wing intellectuals like Augusto Salazar Bondy (Peru),⁴

3. The vocabulary circulating in these approaches should not be confused with the approaches themselves. For example, even though the concept of connection is functional with regard to what I call a “connectionistic perspective” here, it is part of the recurring lexicon of the third function of higher education irrespective of which “place” it is in (the same is valid for the concept of “transfer”).

4. In his essay entitled *Dominación y extensión universitaria*, he maintains that the term “extension”, in its most common university use, is connected, not by chance, to the idea of an intellectual core from which science, technology and art irradiate. Therefore, Salazar Bondy adds that to be genuine,

and Paulo Freire (Brazil) (1973), which led to a quest for alternatives to overcome them. This subsequently led to an attempt to replace the extension organiser with a social interaction organiser (universities in Pamplona, Spain, and in Sucre reflected this by creating social interaction offices). Although social interaction points to a democratising perspective that implies giving priority to an alliance with social organisations whose aim is to overcome the status quo and the inequalities of poverty and social injustice, its generalisation, in Latin America at least, does not seem to have prospered, possibly because the nomenclature attempted to co-opt the connectionistic logics and policies of the 1990s.

We can find another intermediate attempt in the concept of social projection, which designates another way of conceiving the higher education-society relationship, used mainly in Colombia and Peru (Amaya, 2003; Aponte, 2004; Espinosa, Ramírez, Correa & Morales, 2005; González, 2007; Huérfano & Seco, 2007; López, Rondón, Castro et al., 2007; Mendoza, 2004; Rocha & Arrieta, 2000), but which, however, does not manage to shake off entirely the problem represented by the fact that the agents of higher education are the ones who tend to end up producing the definitions over and above a shared construction.

Up to here, an attempt has been made to identify the binding elements of potential approaches, but why, when it comes to defining it, is this third function of higher education so elusive in comparison to the other two: research (knowledge production) and teaching (teaching for a technical-professional education)? Besides being the most recent, it is possibly because it is the most eminently political function of higher education, through which there is a more direct and immediate impact on the reformulation of the social agenda. Consequently, it also has a more direct and immediate impact – taking a concept by P. Bourdieu (2002) – on its own redefinition in the field of power.

3. Sections of the Third Function of Higher Education

Another problem at the time of planning and taking decisions on the creation and continuity of an extension area is the sections into which one ought, can or wants to divide it, in order to attain the general objectives of the policy project of the team running it. The choice of categories for organising the area (and how these are prioritised and subsumed), and what stays in or is left out of the organiser's role, depends, to a great extent, on the underlying notion that the team has of the third function. In any event, and as a guide, I shall present a menu for reflection based on the regrouping of items that recurrently appear in the literature in generic sections referring to practices and/or theorisation attempts:

1. Graduate service (career guidance, job banks, etc.)
2. Student welfare (grants, career guidance, information about degrees, psychophysical care).
3. Training (developing and implementing courses, seminars, workshops, etc.).
4. Media (printing companies, publishing houses, press, broadcasting, radio, websites, etc.).
5. Culture/Cultural management (promotion of artistic, intellectual and sporting processes and events, etc.).
6. Human rights.
7. Technological development.
8. Human resources training (placements, thesis supervision)
9. Business incubators.
10. Social research on priority lines defined by universities and/or the community.
11. Provision of services/ongoing services to third parties (advice, evaluation, technical assistance, etc.).

Some of the tensions⁵ unleashed in these sections are:

“university extension” and “cultural dissemination” must be conceived as an action aimed at dealienating people from each other and, consequently, allowing them to contribute, as independent beings, to cultural creation and social liberation. To be a genuine form of human realisation, extension and cultural dissemination, like all other kinds of education, have to be liberating, and to become liberating they have to raise awareness. Raising awareness implies awakening people's critical consciousness of their real historic situation and the consequent decision of acting on reality; in other words, a commitment to transformative action to realise society's reason (Quiroga Moreno, 2002). *De la extensión universitaria a la interacción social en la universidad actual*. Cochabamba, Bolivia. Unpublished: supplied by courtesy of the author, given as a paper at the VII Jornadas Regionales de Investigación en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales held in San Salvador de Jujuy.

5. I have covered this issue in greater depth in other works.

- The problem of whether or not it is reasonable to charge for services arising from the actions of some of the enumerated items.
- Tasks that are controversial, because they simultaneously involve teaching and extension (such as human resources training) or research and extension (such as some lines of social research classified under this section).
- Overlapping that may occur between some sections like, for example, media and cultural management, since a publication policy or radio programming both involve a cultural agenda, or training and provision of services, since a service could be training for a sector requiring it.

In turn, breaking down an area into sections leads to another problem, such as training the people in charge of running them. For example, if a university has a radio station and also offers a degree in communication, it is a very good option for the radio station's management to seek out professionals from that degree course. These kinds of things, which appear almost common-sensical,⁶ are, nevertheless, not very common in the organisation and management of extension. The main reason for this is that university professionals do not have any training in the third function, though they do have training in research and teaching (consequently, a fundamental alternative for running and managing the third function is to create curricular and extracurricular spaces for training, something that is not very common either).

4. Complementary Recommendations

To conclude, I would like to make some complementary guidance recommendations that serve as food for thought on the management of the area:

1. Locating extension offices in the entrances to academic units to avoid unrealistic, off-putting searches that end up preventing the articulation, in particular, of sectors of the population who find it

hard to connect with others and/or to express their needs clearly.

2. Promoting the development and approval of extension regulations in order to have instruments – over and beyond the norms – that offer points of reference for the organisation, discussion, articulation and unification of criteria on extension policy issues.
3. Locating organisations and sectors where there is a demand for articulation with the major areas of universities' thematic competency in order to open up strategic, permanent channels of interaction that potentially allow articulation with key organisations and sectors in a more institutionalised way.⁷ In this sense, it is very important to record demand; in other words, to classify and file requests submitted by the community via channels other than universities so that these can subsequently become fundamental precedents when the time comes to prepare budgets and manage funding for the interventions.
4. Working in a decentralised manner; in other words, through extension councils in faculties or university schools with representatives of university senates and/or degrees who are aware of the specific nature of the sectors they represent, and, in turn, a university extension council formed by representatives of those schools. Both councils would be chaired by those in charge of the area. This would allow general policies to be developed for universities and academic schools, would prevent an overlapping of activities and would optimise feedback via the communication and action channel of the third function of higher education.

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6. Without overlooking the problems associated with common sense, as considered by authors like A. Gramsci and Serge Moscovici, among others.

7. In Argentina, this is formalised by signing broad agreements and charters, or specific agreements signed by the rectors of national universities as those holding the necessary legal powers. A recurring problem is that formalising agreements or charters to provide proposals with a legal framework often takes longer than the actual duration of the proposals. It is therefore essential to establish mechanisms that make the institutionalisation of extension activity more flexible.

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