



Academic freedom and social responsibility: the role of university organisations and possible instruments for international monitoring

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1. Introduction

Many analyses and declarations about the purpose of higher education emphasise knowledge as a social good and, as such, ought only to be generated, transmitted and transformed for the benefit of society.

From this perspective, an international consensus was established about the role of higher education, making it an irreplaceable element in social development, economic growth and support for the production of competitive goods and services, in the formation and preservation of cultural identity, the maintenance of social cohesion, and finally, in the combat against poverty and the promotion of a culture of peace (UNESCO, 1996).

The centrality of higher education in the demands of society, in the productive sector and the globalisation of the economy becomes clearer every day. It has changed the relations of universities with respect to public policies which, especially in Latin America, have moved on from the prevailing paternalism of recent decades towards, in certain instances, an almost total restriction on public subsidies, and, more generally, towards linking university budgets with the evaluation of results and with an enhanced accountability.

The evaluative nature of the State is not only a guarantee of but also an underpinning to the accountability of higher education institutions to the society that created them. But public policies have not only to take into account the fact that education must be at the service of production and the needs of the market. It has also to take into consideration the double bind which every educational institution faces: on the one hand, the search for solutions to such demands, needs and shortages of a society

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1 that must be competitive; and on the other hand, the commitment that constitutes its
2 essence—namely, the creation and regeneration of knowledge itself.

3 **2. Key conditions**

4 The success of such complex and multiple proposals can only be achieved in pluralist
5 and free institutions, enjoying full autonomy and academic freedom, since creativity is
6 possible only through self-determination. Hence, it is indispensable that the scientific,
7 technical and humanistic contributions to social development be attentive to real needs.
8 They should not lose sight of their academic duties and the freedom to seek knowledge.

9 The exercise of academic freedom implies a full awareness of the responsibility
10 each institution has in the training of human resources to the highest level. This is
11 a strategic factor of the development of people and the evolution of knowledge in
12 different disciplines.

13 **3. Role of university organisations**

14 Convergence between academic freedom and social responsibility constitutes a nat-
15 ural space for the daily activities of every higher education institution. In this context,
16 university organisations play a relevant role. They have their own rationale for being
17 at the service of the institutions that decide to be associated with them. Universities
18 become members of such organisations because they expect that membership will bring
19 benefits to their academic community. The main purpose of organisations that bring uni-
20 versities together is the sustained and on-going development of activities which advance
21 and strengthen their main functions: teaching, research and extension, and reinforce as
22 well efficient management that improves productive interaction between themselves and
23 their environment, whilst respecting both their autonomy and their diversity.

24 The work of university organisations must form a solid base from which links be-
25 tween the free choice of academic purpose and the social function of each university
26 may grow and flourish. In the local, regional or world context, these organisations have
27 the obligation to promote reflection on the importance—and the place—of higher edu-
28 cation for the present and future of our nations and for the future of our students who
29 place their prospects of both personal and professional development into the hands of
30 the university.

31 The role university organisations fulfil has six main dimensions:

- 32 1. the defence of autonomy and of the freedom to teach, to research and to learn,
- 33 2. enhancing the quality of academic work,
- 34 3. promoting new information and communication technologies,
- 35 4. the recognition of academic excellence,
- 36 5. the dissemination of academic knowledge,
- 37 6. the advancement of internationalisation.

1 1. *The defence of the autonomy and freedom of teaching and research.* Recognition
2 and consolidation of university autonomy enhance both its academic purpose and free-
3 dom. Autonomy defines and shapes both its organisation and its internal governance,
4 distributes its financial resources, generates income from different sources, integrates its
5 leadership, establishes the special conditions in which learning takes place and upholds
6 the freedom to conduct teaching and research. Hence, higher education institutions
7 ought to be able to self-regulate themselves with minimal external interference.

8 Such conditions are particularly relevant in the case of the universities of Latin
9 American because the public institutions of this region have sometimes suffered from
10 the interference of external interests and political groups, often in violation not only
11 of their own bye-laws but also of national legislation itself.

12 Clearly, the genuine exercise of autonomy, academic freedom and self-governance
13 entails responsibilities which must take into account the university's mission. These
14 responsibilities include reaching a balance between conflicting interests, between the
15 different sectors that may wield power. These include federal and state governments,
16 graduates, councils, patrons or donors, students, authorities, administrators and society
17 in general.

18 In such a setting, the role of university organisations, at least in Latin America, is
19 to defend the universities' freedom of teaching and research, to support the organised
20 participation of the academic communities in their own governance and administration.
21 An indispensable condition for a university to be member of such organisations is
22 the legal and authentic guarantee that its teachers and community enjoy these rights.
23 Likewise, it is the natural task of university organisations to examine those cases where
24 university autonomy is either violated or attacked or where the academic freedom of
25 individuals comes under duress. It is also to inform (or to act as intermediary with)
26 the appropriate organisations and authorities so that the measures necessary may be
27 taken.

28 2. *Enhancing the quality of academic work.* The exercise of academic freedom
29 implies the duty to train quality human resources, a multidimensional concept, the
30 advancement of which involves inter alia the characteristics of the academic staff, stu-
31 dents, graduates, of the curriculum, teaching-learning techniques, infrastructure, sources
32 of financing and links with other institutions. Our institutions advance their improve-
33 ment through the continuous reflection on their multiple performances. And university
34 organisations will have to offer various lines of action in support of their member
35 institutions.

36 On the one hand, they can support the training of human resources in educational
37 self-evaluation which involves forming evaluation groups within their own establish-
38 ments. Self-evaluation is an ideal method of reflection on performance achieved and
39 on work to be done. It responds better to the interests and needs of each institution.

40 University organisations also design and carry out programmes which provide uni-
41 versities with the basic elements to support the processes of external evaluation and
42 accreditation that are so much in vogue today. In any case, the capacity generating
43 activities which focus on self-evaluation and on external evaluation should be geared
44 towards both strengthening academia and to improving the quality of the education it
45 provides.

1 By improving the quality of institutions, self-evaluation and external evaluation facil-
2 itate the mutual recognition of degrees, of professional titles and, through this process,
3 also serves to improve the academic and professional mobility.

4 The quality of the universities' academic undertakings is also enhanced by discussion,
5 seminars and congresses. They stimulate both the development of research as well as
6 critical and creative ventures within the academic community itself. For universities to
7 take part in these programmes, university organisations must have means to stock the
8 relevant information about different social milieux so that educational institutions may
9 be made aware of the needs they are called upon to meet. University organisations
10 give a fillip to student mobility by providing management programmes jointly held
11 with those international agencies and authorities that finance and support exchange
12 programmes.

13 Furthermore, university organisations also provide information about the availability
14 of grants or exchange programmes in different institutions and in different disciplines
15 and areas of knowledge. Establishing co-operation agreements between university or-
16 ganisations and universities enables joint research to be carried out, which in turn
17 meets that mutual interest in academia to develop networks of academic support and
18 information exchange.

19 University organisations should create for themselves those conditions that allow
20 them to act as consultancy, intercommunication, enabling and updating agencies, act-
21 ing in such settings as those associated with distance education. For this purpose, pro-
22 grammes on the methodology and upgrading of educational practice amongst teachers
23 active in this mode of education are currently under development.

24 3. *Promoting new information and communication technologies.* University auton-
25 omy and the freedom of teaching, learning and research require conditions that go far
26 beyond the frontiers of school education and beyond traditional methods of learning,
27 information and communication.

28 Multimedia programmes, e-mail, teleconferences and Internet expand the horizons
29 and transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The availability of information
30 has become inexhaustible and universities should prepare their students for the choice,
31 analysis and evaluation of knowledge they acquire through these means as well as
32 incorporate this technology in tasks such as the following:

- 33 ● the design and production of pedagogical material,
- 34 ● the creation of virtual classrooms in which students and academic staff from different
35 geographical areas interact,
- 36 ● communication between researchers in different locations and
- 37 ● access to databases and sources of information.

38 In this sphere, university organisations have a broad range of action to facilitate the
39 incorporation of high technology in support of academic tasks in each university. In
40 this respect

- 41 ● Organisations should manage and actively encourage the use of teleconferences as a
42 means of debate and academic exchange between teachers, researchers and students.

- 1 • The Web pages of university organisations should have the technical potential to
2 convert into true “portals” of the higher education they offer. To do this, it requires
3 academic information classified by theme; a platform for interactive debate on topics
4 of university interest; the means to disseminate the universities’ activities and profile;
5 a virtual library that operates as a sales point and which disseminates university
6 publications.
- 7 • The information systems of university organisations need to be consolidated in order
8 to promote more efficient work and extend external communication. From this it
9 follows that internal networks encourage team work, the availability of information
10 is consolidated and a better use made of existing human resources; at the same time,
11 library catalogues and documentation centres held by university organisations, being
12 dispensed ‘on-line’, act as a further encouragement and input to academic work and
13 to research.

14 Within the information arena, university organisations have a double objective. First, to
15 constitute an efficient, reliable and updated support for the data needs of universities,
16 which in turn may help them develop further in the realms of planning, management,
17 evaluation and comparative studies on higher education. The second objective relates to
18 their function as reliable and updated consultancy bodies which may serve international
19 organisations and other institutions that need up-to-date information on higher education
20 across the world.

21 This type of tool helps international university organisations develop academic net-
22 works to carry out common activities—the shared use of specialised equipment, aca-
23 demic co-operation between their best scholars and the development of mobility pro-
24 grammes for teachers, researchers and students.

25 This strategy corresponds closely to the profile of the Latin American region, which
26 amongst other things, lacks human and bibliographical resources and appropriate in-
27 frastructures. The potential is high for university organisations, with their databases,
28 their means of dissemination and their academic meetings, to nurture the develop-
29 ment of networks of international collaboration, thereby helping both to improve the
30 quality of university activities and to provide a more sensitive response to society’s
31 expectations.

32 The Union of Latin American Universities recently created the System of Informa-
33 tion on Higher Education and the Caribbean (SIESALC). It will help in the general or
34 specific search for information about academic, administrative and organisational char-
35 acteristics of higher education institutions in Latin America. It will also have modules
36 to help with organising this information for general dissemination.

37 4. *Recognition of academic excellence.* University organisations have the duty to
38 recognise and encourage the spirit of public service, so evident amongst those who
39 devote their life and energy to improving universities and who express best the link
40 between academic freedom and social responsibility. There are many ways in which this
41 link is strengthened: by forming work teams, by promoting scientific and humanistic
42 tasks, cultural identity, integration and the enhancement of academe as ideals worthy of
43 being perpetuated. Conferring prizes and recognition are ways of giving this objective
44 reality and substance.

1 5. *Disseminating academic work.* The publications and output of university organi-
 3 sations also promote the advancement of research in academic communities. Whether
 5 books, learned journals, newsletters or bulletins, they become instruments to dissemi-
 nate the production of the academic estate in institutions and departments and are for
 that reason another expression of their academic freedom.

6. *Impulse for international relations and funding.* In Latin America, public expen-
 7 diture per pupil is lower than in other regions of the world. UNESCO data (1998) show
 9 that in 1995 ordinary public expenditure per student in this region amounted to US
 \$937 dollars as against \$1241 in Africa, in Asia and Oceania \$5588, in North America
 \$5596 and in Europe \$6585. Clearly, education is under-funded in Latin America.

11 The quest for funds, the support of international funding agencies and selling ser-
 vices, patents, consultancies and applied research, as well as donations, provide some
 13 solution to the university by contributing to alleviating some funding problems.

Links with strategic partners to develop further the activities of universities and
 15 university organisations themselves cannot wait. It is becoming increasingly evident
 that educational institutions cannot exist and nor can they carry out their functions
 17 in isolation. University organisations can promote agreements for collaboration and
 financial resources to support specific activities in their member universities.

Three provisional conclusions:

- 19 1. University organisations can and should enhance the academic development of their
 21 members in a context of freedom and institutional and national diversity; thus, they
 contribute to the exercise of the social responsibility of the universities as generators
 23 of knowledge, trainers of specialised human resources and disseminators of culture.
- 25 2. In their everyday tasks, university organisations can, as a support for efficient infor-
 mation systems, launch institutional networks of co-operation to stimulate research,
 teaching and international mobility in the contemporary globalised world.
- 27 3. International university associations together with the combined knowledge of their
 29 members can help represent university interests in a systematic manner inside those
 international organisations whose policies have an impact on the university world,
 on its ventures and its tasks. This activity should lead university organisations to
 31 becoming the spokespersons and partners of their members.

33 There is much to be done. I am convinced that we can—and must—take up the chal-
 lenge of working for the joint and acknowledged success of these and other proposals.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Rocío Santamaría and Jorge Peralta A. for the
 preparation of a preliminary version of this article.