



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Dangerous Mistake: Research as a Commodity in University Institutions

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This letter comments on the problems that are emerging in the world, specifically in Latin America, when universities treat research as a commodity. The particularity of this perspective is that it identifies what seems to be a global problem in universities with managerial approaches, in which the pursue for short term results and fast acquired prestige hurt sounded contributions to global issues that require more thoughtful approaches and careful reflection.

Teaching colleges are progressively moving towards research ones in Latin America, either because of government regulations (as in Peru, Chile or Ecuador), or by the market itself. The latter can also be observed in US universities (Polster 2007, Jensen 2005), being particularly instructive that universities “should focus on research to pursue knowledge, to increase the reputation of the institution, and improve the quality of people’s lives” (Jensen 2005). An important point in what Jensen indicates is the research competence, as an intellectual activity in the generation of academic reputation, bearing in mind that it is well known, in profit universities, the opposition CFO’s in research investment (Nature 2016), primarily because “the increasing focus on the business case for funding schemes forces researchers to follow short-term strategies that might give an immediate return on investment” (Liu and Tan 2017), which is counterproductive in the sustainable generation of knowledge as “a short-term view is unlikely to solve global societal challenges that call for a long-term perspective and strategy, such as mitigating climate change (Liu and Tan 2017), to which should be added crucial issues such as intolerance, racism, malnutrition and others.

In that sense, it is a great mistake to treat research as a commodity, a mistake that frequently happens in teaching colleges in the process of becoming research universities, particularly in institutions for profit, where the managerial approach is pervasive and the search for immediate results is compulsory. It is necessary to have a medium- and long-term vision in research, which should be socially responsible and sustainable in time, allowing the development of solid contributions in knowledge generation, which will also serve as potential generators of prestige for the institution, in order to avoid at all costs what Hallonsten has called academic capitalism, which causes that “universities abandon traditional meritocratic and collegial governance to hunt money, prestige and a stronger brand” (Hallonsten 2016).

Though I agree in principle with Hallonsten, I do think that prestige should be a consequence and not an end, and it should be derived from sound scholarly contributions. Prestige, should be based on the role that the university has in the understanding, analysis of the diverse social and natural contexts that are part of our world, as well as in the improvement of our quality of life (Graham and Diamond 1997).

Research as a generator of prestige is an issue that has been extensively discussed by several researchers (Kwiek 2016, Morpew et al. 2016, McGuire et al. 1988, Volkwein and Sweitzer 2006); being the common denominator the role of research as a great asset in positioning universities, which leads us to consider other forms of profitability, beyond the factual economic one. The mistake of considering research as a commodity arises in institutions in which research lines are arranged by decree or with a top-down view, where decision-makers in the top stratum are completely unaware of research processes, avoiding a healthy socialization of the strategic plan, with academic units. To paraphrase Hegel, from the opposition of opposites arises the resolution of problems: therefore, the pretension of avoiding vivid discussions is untenable. Academic activity is based on discussion of problems, hypotheses, experiments and solutions, a complex dialectical spiral whose essential motive is the confrontation of ideas: without this, there will be no progress in knowledge generation. And it is particularly worrying to have academic councils in which strategies and decisions are communicated but not discussed, or where that discussion happens in the upper levels of the pyramid, where no scholars participate, but managers, marketers and CFO's decide the academic and research path that the institution must follow. Thus, at all costs should be avoided the replacement of academics in key academic positions, like Deans or program Chairs, by managers or marketers with no knowledge of research and academia. In this regard, academics with managerial competences should be most welcomed for these positions.

Universities have the mission of promoting the sustainable generation of knowledge, both in undergraduate and graduate academic programs--the keyword being "sustainable"-- and avoiding at all costs treating research as a commodity. When that happens, they do not deserve the noble title of *university*.

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