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University Teachers' Conceptions of What University Is: Implications for the Future of Higher Education

Elisa Chaleta

Abstract

This chapter presents the perception of university teachers about the university, the most recent changes and how they have influenced their activity. The phenomenographic study was conducted with 10 university teachers, nine females and one male with more than 15 years of professional activity. The perception of the university emerges, in the teachers' voice, focused on the description of its mission, namely as a context for the production and diffusion of knowledge to society, as a space for creative and critical thinking about the world, as an interdisciplinary space and as a system focused on teaching and research. It also includes characteristics related to its structure and functioning, such as the level of hierarchization, bureaucratization, competitiveness, dehumanization and bibliometrics overvaluation. Regarding the perceived changes, they are related to the structural reforms resulting from the Bologna Process, diverse student populations, research and internationalization, new technologies, institutional cooperation, bureaucratization and relationship with the community. Teachers also revealed some dissatisfaction in the way they are experiencing university life due to the overwork resulting from the multiple tasks required in the four activity strands (teaching, research, management and extension) with an impact on quality and innovation, but in line with what the institution demands.

Keywords: university, higher education, experience, perception of university teachers, phenomenographic analysis

1. Introduction

The idea of school, massified in the last decades by the democratization of societies, is starting to be questioned in its mission as a 'social mobility elevator' and constrained by the dictates of economic development. As Paulo Freire stated four decades ago, the school, considered here in its broadest sense, cannot be seen detached from the sociohistorical, economic and political context at the time it is analysed [1].

The university, as we know it today, is an institution, if not in crisis, then in change. The twenty-first century, in particular, has brought remarkable global changes that have been questioning previous models of the university such as Kant's, who understood the mission of the university/faculties as the development of the various branches of knowledge outside the control of the political power with

supreme authority and total freedom of thought to Humboldt's more extreme vision, which proposed professors total freedom to research and teach what they researched and students freedom to learn and research, to chart their learning paths and decide the timing of their final examinations [2]. Another characteristic of the Humboldtian University (and of the German system) was that students could change universities whenever they wanted and that professors had to change, necessarily, to progress in their careers. This aspect assumes a centrality in the current dominant thinking about the university that considers teachers' and students' mobility as central [3].

Over the centuries, the university has been endowed with respectability, trust and prestige, ensuring for centuries that those who attended it had a high social status and a guarantee of well-paid professions. This relevance attributed to university kept it, for a long time, protected from true scrutiny of its nature, its functioning and its mission as if it was a single reality regardless of the historical moment or its geographical location [4]. The report on the condition of knowledge in the most developed societies commissioned by the Council of Universities to the government of Quebec and which resulted in the work of Lyotard 'The Post-Modern Condition' showed that the university assumed, throughout history, multiple forms, varied functions and different missions and that it was in modernity that it experienced its maximum brilliance [5]. The end of modernity determined the end of the university as we knew it and determined the urgency of the university to rethink itself.

Another of the central themes that mark the discussion of the university's mission today dates back to the eighteenth century, from the proposal of Adam Smith, who advocates a conception of the university committed to the usefulness of knowledge for the progress of society. This affirms the importance of the organization of the institution and of knowledge centered on social needs. It theorizes a school that the middle classes can access and where teachers are paid according to performance. The evolution of this trend, under Bentham's influence, led to the emergence in the nineteenth century of the University of London as a secular institution, concerned with the development of professional skills and its openness to less-favoured social classes. Along the same lines followed the foundation of the 'Grandes Écoles' in the eighteenth century France, whose design was aimed at the high-level training of state officials but, in this case, under the central administration of the state. It resulted in a highly prestigious system that is still in existence, strongly elitist, with an essentially technical-professional focus. The excellence of liberal education aimed at the training of a cosmopolitan citizen is found in the guidelines identified in the archetypical model of the Oxford and Cambridge Universities, as those that embody the ideal of training the cultural and political elites [6].

All these ways of conceiving and organizing universities persist today and are a factor of internal tensions in each institution in which teachers are led/forced to assume the discourse of the researcher, the public servant, the economic agent and the guardian of the great civilizational values. The university, as a place of production, legitimization and dissemination of knowledge, has entered into upheaval, making it imperative, but almost impossible, to redefine the status and mission of the university in this contemporary world. Probably because in recent times there has been a tendency towards a certain Americanization of the university in the sense of the generalized imposition of the regime of the logic of money in place of the notion of natural identity as the instance, which determines all forms of investment in social life [7] with a significant loss of the function of the production of national culture. Once this function of legitimating a political and social organization has been lost, the university has adopted a business model and is governed by principles of accountability, effectiveness and efficiency, functionalization and de-professionalization of teachers [8–11]. Readings point out the fact that along with the corporatization of universities, there has been the emergence of the

concept of excellence, which has become central, but absolutely empty of content (the technobureaucratic notion of excellence) [8]. Jesu no considers that the current neoliberal turn, in which the 'markets' take centre stage, is leading universities to the configuration of companies very directed toward the cult of efficiency (doing more with less) and to consider knowledge not as an end in itself, but as a means (an instrument susceptible of economic added value) [6].

The entrepreneurial culture that could bring greater freedom and autonomy ended up resulting in greater control and verticalization. The effect on universities has determined the change of organization from horizontal models to vertical models (often resulting from legislative changes at the level of the legal regime of the institutions), which has caused perplexity among teaching staff and even leaders and also some resistance due to the impact on the institutional organization (grouping and concentration/fusion of traditional departments and institutes in the name of a certain concept of efficiency reinforced by the imposition of internal and external evaluation mechanisms) and on the redirection of research (from basic to applied). The studies conducted by Fulton in several British universities showed collective ambivalence about the desirability of the changes [12], oscillating between identification with the managerial objectives considered reasonable and identification with traditional and more sceptical academic values [13]. In this context Barnett identifies two lines of thought. The first, more conservative and marked by an ideal of higher education more separated from society, considers the existence of intellectual spaces which in themselves justify the university. The second, more marked by postmodern persuasion and the idea that the university has only instrumental ends and is more concerned with its form than its substance. Both positions are limited for the contemporary situation of universities, making it necessary to take a broader look at the complexity of a university inexorably intertwined with society in general and with new universal challenges [14].

Another milestone in the context of changes in higher education is the Bologna Declaration of 1999, currently signed by 47 European countries. The document proposes the creation of a European Higher Education Area that is internationally competitive by introducing mechanisms for greater compatibility and comparability of higher education systems in order to promote the mobility and employability of citizens. Despite its very general initial objectives for a long-term period involving the change of many political actors, much has been achieved in the context of the European space and even beyond [15–19]. The increasing success of mobility programmes, transparency and recognition of foreign programmes and degrees has been progressively linked to broader economic imperatives in the framework of higher education [20] deepened in the agenda of the Lisbon Strategy (European Council, 2000), which aimed at a knowledge-based economy to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic region in the world [21]. This ambition resulted in extensive funding for research, professionalization and lifelong learning [22] and increasingly to the gradual interweaving of supranational and intergovernmental processes in Europe [17, 23].

Although the initial objective focused on research, development and innovation [22], Bologna also ended up having an impact on teaching and learning models. Today the structure of three study cycles, credit recognition, mobility of teachers, students and staff, national qualifications frameworks, recognition of qualifications, quality assurance and the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area are common [24, 25]. It can thus be considered that the main architectural elements of the declaration have been implemented in most European countries, translated into national legislation and regulation, despite the different policy trajectories followed by countries to achieve the objectives that depend on national idiosyncrasies, different starting points, different speeds of implementation,

different national policy agendas and different perceptions of change agents [4]. In a globalized context, major changes in Europe have inevitably aroused the attention of other regions. The European higher education space has become the standard competitor of the USA as a result of the new degree structure, reinforced by the introduction of quality assurance systems, with a positive impact on the perceived recognition of the quality of European higher education with effects on attracting international students. Several studies report changes in the organization of higher education systems along similar lines to those proposed by the Bologna reform in various regions of the world, determining greater transparency of qualifications in the USA, quality assurance concerns in Asia and greater mobility in Africa [26, 27].

As a result of these policies, higher education has changed remarkably quickly. The widespread shift from elite education to mass education has been accompanied by phenomena such as globalization, the commodification of higher education (knowledge services for potential customers), the close relationship with society, the agendas of inclusion (participation, access and equal opportunities), the digital technology revolution, the potential for internationalization, rankings and state-sponsored quality assessment mechanisms that have increased competition between institutions. In the globalized knowledge society (or knowledge economy), two particular trends are worth highlighting—internationalization and multidisciplinary approaches. The knowledge society requires skilled leaders (and manpower) able to face the many new challenges facing businesses, governments and societies worldwide, which require innovative approaches and solutions. Higher education institutions are no longer able to train graduates to address all current and emerging challenges from a single disciplinary source, so the pressure is increasing on the need for interdisciplinary approaches both at the research level and in preparation for the future (as yet unclear) jobs and leadership positions. This need also requires integrated efforts from researchers from various areas of expertise and various backgrounds, which introduces new levels of complexity at both research and training levels [4]. In a ‘supercomplex world’ [28], nothing can be understood with certainty or security or taken for granted as we are continually challenged conceptually by the contestation of the structures by which we are guided. Supercomplexity involves a fragility resulting from social change and technological transformation and, even more relevant, a greater uncertainty in the way we understand the world, how we understand ourselves and how we feel safe to act in that world, and it is expected that in such a liquid and diffuse framework change becomes even more difficult. Added to this difficulty is a university that is facing a critical time of building a new identity and that seeks to correspond to the wishes of the community, to the interests of its financial backers and to the designs of its actors.

As the university is a context traditionally very resistant to change [29], it becomes fundamental to involve all institutional actors in the discussion of what the university is and what it is for so that change becomes possible. It is in this context, and from the need to know the discourse of the actors, in this case university teachers, that we present this study which intends to contribute to a deeper knowledge about the way they conceptualize the university at present, the perceived changes and the way they experience them.

2. Method

This qualitative study is concerned with defining and deepening the way knowledge is produced and the processes involved in the construction of this knowledge [30]. In a qualitative research, the analysis of lived experience occupies a central place [31] and in the phenomenographic qualitative approach [32], which was used in this

study, it is important to understand the meaning of phenomena for the individual in his/her natural context, taking into account the meaning assigned to it [33]. Qualitative research, from a phenomenographic perspective, accepts the existence of multiple realities constructed both individually and collectively and, from this perspective, seeks to understand the phenomena from the point of view or perspective of the subjects themselves [34]. In summary, the phenomenographic study that we presented has an exploratory nature that allows analysing the subjects' conceptions, observing their variation and architecture based on the descriptions made, allowing us to understand how university teachers conceptualize the university, the perceived changes and their own experience of the phenomenon.

2.1 Participants

The selection of participants was carried out through prior contact with teachers who at the time were teaching on teacher training courses at various educational levels and who were willing to participate in the study. The choice of these teachers was due to a particular interest in knowing the perspective of teachers with greater affinity with the area of education. Of the 15 teachers who initially volunteered to participate in the study, only 10 responded.

The participants were aged between 47 and 65 years (average 52 years), nine were females and one male. Four lecturers had between 15 and 20 years of service at the university, five between 20 and 30 years and one is 40 years old. With regard to initial training, two lecturers (S5 and S7) reported training in education sciences, five in exact sciences (S1, S2, S3, S8 and S9), three of whom had specific training for teaching (S1, S2 and S9) and one reported training in the humanities (S4). Two of the teachers did not answer this question (S6 and S10).

We can also state that almost all of the teaching staff had held the doctorate degree for more than 10 years, with only one having obtained the degree more recently (S5). With regard to the courses they teach, six mentioned the first and second cycles of preschool education and basic education and four stated that they take part in the teaching of master's degrees in teaching (basic and secondary education).

2.2 Instruments and procedures

The present work is part of a broader study on university teachers' perspective on the university nowadays. Firstly, we defined a set of questions based on the literature, and then, we carried out an exploratory study with two teachers in order to check the relevance, clarity and comprehensibility of the questions. We present below the results of three questions: (i) what is a university for you? (ii) since you have been at university, what changes do you identify as the most significant? (iii) how are you currently experiencing university? The subjects were numbered from one to 10 (S1–S10) and the registration criterion consisted in the annotation of all the different statements present in the discourse of each participant as belonging to a given theme or category and not in the number of times they were mentioned by each of the participants, also obeying the principle recommended in these cases of mutual exclusion [35].

3. Results

The responses obtained from the aforementioned questions were subjected to content analysis. The results in relation to the first question are published [4] so we present them in summary form.

3.1 Perception of university teachers about the university

The perception of university teachers about what the university is emerged centred on the description of its mission being the focus placed essentially on four aspects: university as a context of production and diffusion of knowledge for society, as a space for creative and critical thinking about the world, as a multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary space and as a system centred on teaching and research. In relation to the first aspect, the university is perceived as a context for the production and dissemination of knowledge for society, a view that is in line with the 'knowledge society', although it is not possible to infer whether university lecturers are aware that in this model, as Barnett [14] states, society ends up generating its own definitions of legitimate knowledge, creating constraints at the level of 'academic freedom' or even of the 'academic community' in a more classical view of the concepts. The university perceived as a space for creative and critical thinking and about the world revealed a conception more in line with the Kantian vision that presupposes the ability to think and judge freely and independently in a context of academic freedom; however, this is not a very present vision in the teachers' discourse, which allowed us to infer that the idea of the university as a producer of great universal ideas or as a critical awareness of society is no longer present in corporate universities that operate with business models and assume agendas, values and operating principles of the society in general, making the existence of a certain ideal of the university capable of transforming the world through the thought it produces unfeasible, as Jarvis states [36]. The university seen as a multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary space indicates to us that the discourse around the need to respond to new challenges that require innovative approaches and solutions from the crossing of various disciplinary sources have entered the academy, so it is not surprising to find it in the teachers' discourse. The university perceived as a system centred on teaching and research emerged in the teachers' vision, although the introduction of the Bologna assumptions associated with the Lisbon strategy agenda has emphasized the research component as a central aspect in universities.

We also found in the teachers' discourse references to the structure and functioning of the university and, in this case, teachers highlighted more negative aspects. We find references to the very hierarchical, complex and bureaucratic structure of the institution and the perception of an increasing functionalization of teachers in a competitive and dehumanized space, marked by a hypervalorisation of bibliometrics.

3.2 Changes in the university perceived by university teachers

The perceived changes focus on aspects related to the change in the structure of education due to the Bologna Process, the greater diversity of publics, research and internationalization, new technologies, institutional cooperation, the bureaucratization of decision-making processes and the relationship with the community. In most of these themes, there is some ambivalence among teachers, as detailed below.

3.2.1 Change in the training structure

As we can see in the two examples below, teachers refer to changes resulting from the implementation of the Bologna Process related to the shortening of the duration of the study cycles (in particular the 1st cycle). The change of paradigm in terms of the teaching and learning process is also mentioned, which shifts the centrality from the teacher to the student.

The changes I identify as most significant are related to the reduction in the duration of 1st cycle courses. The hurried training of our students has robbed them of time for personal and intellectual growth. I feel that students reach the end of their training increasingly unprepared and immature (S1).

The post-Bologna transition in the way of understanding the learning process in students and the teacher's mediation function (S5).

3.2.2 Diversity of publics

The democratization of higher education, its massification, the academic mobility of students and the design of lifelong learning have determined a considerable increase and diversification of the student population as stated by the lecturers.

... welcoming diverse audiences to the University (S3).

A greater access of students from different social backgrounds, which always enriches us, giving us even more challenging jobs (S4).

3.2.3 Research and internationalization

In relation to research, there is the funding aspect that has increased and diversified in the last decades and also the pressure for publication, which is felt to be a difficult aspect to achieve. Internationalisation emerges as an important aspect at the level of cooperation networks and scientific dissemination intertwined with the research component.

The financing of research (S3).

Increased emphasis on the research component and valuing the quantity of research products without providing effective conditions for lecturers to be able to do so (at the University where I work, in particular) (S10).

The most significant aspect for me is networking, both at the research level and at the level of seminars in which we participate (S3).

3.2.4 New technologies

The new technologies are one of the aspects mentioned by teachers, the most relevant aspect being the ease of communication in the context of the scientific community and greater ease of access to knowledge.

The changes introduced by the new communication technologies, which have created new opportunities... and facilitate communication between colleagues (S9).

On the other hand, technological advancement has brought improved communications and access to knowledge (S10).

3.2.5 Institutional affiliation

From the teachers' discourse, we can infer some feeling of isolation, lack of appreciation of the work done, lack of cooperation within the institution and even institutional identification or affiliation. This view may be linked to the teacher

evaluation component introduced in the last decade and to a more competitive perspective that materializes in terms of career progression, but this is not explicit in the teachers' discourse.

The growing non 'wearing of the UÉ jersey' (of too important a part of the employees, teaching and other) (S4).

The relationship of the teacher with the institution, not the institution itself (S6).

No support for cooperative work (S7).

The responsibility to deepen knowledge to be able to promote its continuous construction in dialogue based in the institution does not seem valued (S8).

3.2.6 Institutional bureaucratization

One of the aspects most referred to by teachers relates to excessive institutional bureaucratization, seen as an obstacle to the development of quality scientific activity and perceived as a component that is over-valued by the institution.

Ultra-bureaucratization from a systemic point of view, challenging human resources to tasks that do not always match the activities for which they should be responsible (S2).

The little use of intelligence in the different areas, especially management and administrative execution, where it is always needed (S4).

The bureaucratic control that is carried out (S5).

Blind compliance with procedures and bureaucracies (S7).

Teachers are, for example, called upon to exercise their ability to disseminate courses and many hours are spent on tasks of this nature; filling out platforms and being efficient in this is valued. To be a responsible lecturer is to assume that one performs bureaucratic tasks lightly edged with scientific content (S8).

3.2.7 Relationship with the community

The university committed to society and the production of knowledge centred on social needs or problems is considered in the discourse of university teachers.

A certain openness to the environment (S3).

A greater connection of the University to the different Communities (S4).

In summary, we can observe that the changes resulting from the implementation of the Bologna process do not assume great centrality in the teachers' discourse. There is only one reference to the shorter duration of the study cycles and another to the paradigm shift in the teaching and learning model, which allows us to infer that after more than a decade the transformations resulting from the process have already been accepted and to some extent assimilated. The teachers also highlighted in their speech, in a positive way, the diversity of publics, the changes at the level of research and internationalization and the new technologies, although these are considered more

in terms of communication and access to knowledge than as transformative tools for practices. The relationship between the university and the community also appears in the teachers' speech but without much emphasis. The teachers' discourse gives great emphasis, in a negative way, to the lack of identification and institutional cooperation and to the growing bureaucratization of teaching activity, seen as harmful interference in the quality of work at the level of teaching and research. Regarding the personal experience of the university, some characteristics emerge that we will now detail.

3.3 Personal experience of university

The way teachers are experiencing their professional experience at the university reveals some apprehension and some diversity at the level of motivation. The presence of scientific autonomy is mentioned in the discourse and no teacher claims a lack of scientific autonomy. The most critical aspect in the discourse of a large proportion of teachers is the excessive amount of activity that impacts the quality of their work and also some difficulties in terms of cooperation within the institutional context.

3.3.1 Apprehension

As we can see from the examples, when referring to the university in general, teachers feel some apprehension or concern regarding the current situation.

With some concern (S1).

With concern that it is moving further and further away from what I expect from a University (S3).

With apprehension (S4).

With some apprehension (S8).

3.3.2 (De)motivation

With regard to motivation, it is present only in the speech of two teachers and in a different sense, either stating motivation in the face of permanent challenges or demotivation.

With motivation because the challenges are permanent (S2).

Emotionally I feel a great demotivation that I try to overcome (S10).

3.3.3 Scientific autonomy

We found that there is no reflection of a lack of scientific autonomy in the teachers' discourse.

With scientific autonomy (S5).

With the concern of those who consider that a University should make public opinion and not follow public opinion (S6).

In the various axes that compose it, I research, I disseminate, and I am a teacher (S9).

3.3.4 Over-activity

Teachers' over-activity in trying to reconcile the various professional aspects of teaching, research, management and extension is the aspect with the greatest emphasis in the discourse analysed, the greatest concern being the lack of time to produce more innovative and higher quality work as we can observe in the examples below.

What the lecturer is nowadays expected to do in the multiple facets of his or her activity (teaching, research, management and extension), makes it difficult to respond to all the demands in the way I would like (S1).

Teaching and learning also become, by these criteria, a mechanic that can be reproduced from year to year. There is no time and no relevance is given to the creation of innovative ways of being a teacher and a student that create a future. Research often becomes a mechanic where innovation is absent but which allows a response to the institutional criteria in force (S3).

...but also overloaded with teaching time, when it is necessary to meet the demands of a differentiated nature that are requested of a teacher at this level of education (publication of articles; research...) (S5)

... and with the impression that time for reading, reflecting, deepening, something fundamental for the ethical and intellectual commitment that should move us is scarce and undervalued. Being a good employee, bureaucratically diligent, achieving efficient publication schemes seems to be a combination valued by institutions (S8).

A large percentage of the time is devoted to teaching as the workload has, for several years, been higher than expected. Another significant percentage of time is devoted to university management tasks and community outreach activities, such as training activities. There is no time or motivation left for research or for developing research projects (S10).

3.3.5 Collaboration

Collaboration within the institutional framework appears in the discourse as offering difficulty even though it is seen as possible in more specific contexts.

At the same time I value the teamwork that is possible to develop within the department to which I belong (S6).

A space of little cooperative work, of fulfilling tasks, teaching lessons, little openness to different opinions or working methods, little incentive to the exchange of knowledge and ideas (S7).

In general, we can consider that the teachers' discourse does not reveal much enthusiasm or satisfaction in the way they are experiencing their professional activity at the university, although it is clear that they maintain autonomy and scientific freedom. The need to respond to a multiplicity of tasks required by the four aspects of their activity (teaching, research, management and extension) leads to the perception that they carry out a more superficial and mechanized work, resulting from the lack of time for deeper and higher quality work.

4. Final considerations

The university, after its transformation in modernity as an institution of higher education, has assumed a prominent place in societies and has adopted different models of organization and transmission of knowledge, resulting from the intertwining of education, society, economy, politics and culture. Contemporary times, marked by remarkable global changes, have accentuated the discussion around the university's mission and led to changes in its organization, not always understood by everyone, as the results of this study make evident. We noticed in the discourse of university teachers' apprehension toward the changes and a more pessimistic view in terms of identification or institutional affiliation, a certain feeling of isolation, lack of support and cooperation and a growing critical attitude toward the bureaucratization of teaching activity seen as a harmful interference in the quality of work, particularly at the level of teaching and research. In general, we can consider that the teachers' discourse does not reveal much enthusiasm or satisfaction in the way they are experiencing their professional activity, which seems to derive from the multiple demands and the multiplicity of tasks required by teaching, research and extension within the framework of an institution that is perceived as detached from this reality and the difficulties experienced. This perception of teachers, built in the context of remarkable changes in the last two decades, may perhaps result from the fact that teachers tend to confront a professional identity built 20 or 30 years ago, with a different reality that entails new demands. Their assessment of the current situation may result precisely from the confrontation of this idealized identity built at a time when the nature and way of functioning of the university was different, and hence the apprehension, demotivation or dislike for the new tasks that the new university requires. These results are in line with the study carried out by Fulton in 2003 in various British universities, in which some ambivalence was also found with regard to the desirability of change, translated into an oscillation between more traditional academic values and management objectives deemed reasonable.

It will not be irrelevant to the perception of lesser affiliation or identification of teachers, the more recent organization of the institutions that has become verticalised in the domain of decision making. The consequence of this change, although it has not diminished the feeling of scientific freedom or autonomy, has been progressively limiting teachers' participation in decision making, which may also be contributing to the accentuation of the feeling of isolation. On the other hand, the great technological innovation of the last two decades and the computerization of many procedures may be contributing to a very bureaucratized working perspective, seen as a negative aspect, associated with a certain pressure to respond to a large number of tasks resulting from the increasingly close relationship between the various dimensions of teaching activity. These aspects had already been revealed in the study concerning how teachers currently view the university, perceiving it as a very hierarchical, complex and bureaucratic structure and as requiring an increasing 'functionalization' of teachers in an increasingly competitive and dehumanized space.

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