

CONSTRUCTING A TRUE UNIVERSITY EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Universities in society have always been highly relevant, these institutions are a determining role in the development and economy of any country, being largely responsible for scientific and technological progress, research development and clearly for the training of future competent professionals able to face all the challenges and changing situations of society. The properties of leadership, thinking about the responsibility of educational leadership, do not only fall on the management and/or on the people who lead these institutions. While quality assurance helps institutions to acquire the necessary conditions to improve processes and increase the quality of results, obtain renewals of qualified registrations, etc., the scope of educational leadership cannot be limited by mere certifications or accreditations, nor can it be sponsored only by a handful of managers. Thus, all members of a university community have a significant role in educational leadership. Special emphasis must be placed on the role of the faculty, as these are the people who ultimately have direct and constant contact with the student body and succeed in forging learning communities. The objective of this essay is to demonstrate that university educational leadership should be based on the establishment of a quality culture that advocates the participation of the entire educational community and benefits their personal, work, social and professional development.

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INTRODUCTION

Although it could be said that the role of universities in society has always been highly relevant, currently these institutions constitute an even more determinant protagonism in the development and economy of any country, since these establishments are largely responsible for scientific and technological progress, research development and clearly for the training of future professionals able to face all the challenges and changing situations of society (Lazaro and Hernandez, 2020). In fact, Esquivel et al. (2018) state that in postmodernity one cannot resist or be against change. Moreover, change is so constant and rapid that it should be considered as one more characteristic to which both institutions and individuals should be accustomed. In other words, flexibility, innovation, adaptability, problem solving, among many other characteristics should be part of the collective DNA that defines the modern human being.

Naturally, this changing society has brought a series of challenges to universities, among which we can highlight: the demands of the industrial sector, the appropriate use of new technologies and their combination with methodologies for teaching and learning, globalization, coverage and access to higher education, budget reduction (Acosta et al... 2020), as well as high dropout rates, inclusion, interculturality, the particular needs of the local and national context, new standards to achieve qualified registrations, solidification of interdisciplinarity in interdisciplinarity in higher education, 2020), as well as, the high dropout rate, inclusion, interculturality, the particular needs of the local and national context, the new standards to achieve qualified registrations, the solidification of interdisciplinarity in scientific research processes, among many others. Therefore, if higher education institutions intend to continue to be that fundamental pillar within society, it is necessary to promote institutional improvement actions that involve a large number of members of the educational community with the ultimate goal of ensuring the formation of future professionals with integrity who demonstrate a set of personal, communicative, labor and social competencies that go hand in hand with the current times. According to Jimenez et al. (s.f), a competency is:

...a complex synthesis of knowledge, skills and attitudes; it leads to an application, an action, an activity; it belongs to the realm of practice and empirical verification; it aims to effectively exercise critical functions or tasks in a specific work environment, and; its results must be anticipated and measured qualitatively and/or quantitatively (p.11).

The identification of competencies within the educational sector that people possess allows them to later become leaders in their work environment, thus offering an instrument that promotes the necessary qualities to be a good leader; this is built through education and experience as they are the main sources for the development of individual competencies.

In order to realize the necessary improvements that can meet the aforementioned challenges prevalent in today's changing society, it is crucial that higher education institutions implement processes that enhance educational leadership. The concept of leadership has certainly been defined by several authors and their vision may be modified to some degree. Thus, taking into account authors such as (Noriega, 2008; Pareja et al., 2012; Esquivel et al., 2018), it can be better understood that leadership is a process that includes some key characteristics such as: a) interaction among several people, b) generation of trust among the members of a community, c) influence on others, d) taking advantage of the qualities, strengths and capabilities of others to delegate functions, and e) achievement of common goals.

UNIVERSITY EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP MEASURED IN QUALITY

Now, if one pays close attention to the aforementioned properties of leadership, one might think that the responsibility for educational leadership lies with management and/or the people who lead institutions, in this case universities. Due to this direct correlation between management and leadership, two important trends have emerged; a) managers have been the focus of concentration in most of the research articles on leadership, and b) in the university context, leadership is usually seen as synonymous with obtaining quality status (Cuevas et al., 2019). That is to say, the culture of quality undoubtedly encloses different components that promote the improvement of an establishment since it works towards: resuming institutional accreditation certificates, obtaining qualified registrations of the different academic programs, modernizing the physical plant, increasing financial resources, improving the efficiency of an important number of internal processes, among many others.

Leadership based on quality brings a state of health to universities since they are constantly under pressure to evaluate: their academic efficiency, the relevance of their academic programs offered with respect to the local context, the different curricula, their vision, mission and institutional values, the level of satisfaction of students, teachers and administrators, teaching methodologies, their technological and bibliographic resources, the quality and quantity of scientific production, follow-up of graduates, social outreach, etc.

In their article entitled “*Leadership and Quality in Higher Education*” Cuevas et al. (2019) expose a broad set of various components necessary to establish a policy of educational leadership based on the search for and establishment of quality, among which we can highlight: evaluation of faculty and teaching, coordination of improvement processes, adaptation of new technologies, efficient reception of complaints and claims, search for internationalization, development of a quality assurance system, establishment of a student support system, promotion of assertive communication, among many others.

Due to all these quality processes, which require a lot of work and dedication, universities are kept up to date through improvements and maintain a cyclical process of periodic evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses with respect to standards updated by the national government, which must be met so that academic programs can continue to operate, and be up to the constant challenges of: society, markets, academic production and the technological field.

Examples of this type of educational leadership include, first, the University of Pamplona, which is a public institution located in the department of Norte de Santander, Colombia. This establishment recently achieved high quality institutional accreditation in 2021 as a result of a corporate goal proposed in 2012, which at first was thought to be too ambitious. Thanks to this status, the university can offer more benefits to its community, such as: greater international mobility thanks to agreements with foreign universities or universities that enjoy a better status and valuation in the labor market (Universidad de Pamplona, 2022); and, secondly, the Minuto de Dios University Corporation, a private institution, located mainly in Bogota-Colombia, but with several branches nationwide, who recently presented institutional accreditation in high quality in 2022, as a strategic positioning plan called 2020 - 2025 (Uniminuto, 2020).

However, educational leadership cannot be limited to institutional quality in terms of accreditations or structural reforms, nor can it be promoted exclusively by institutional management or directors. On the contrary, true educational leadership is conceived as the orientation of human actions. As Cuevas et al. (2019) put it:

Improvement is probably the most frequently mentioned objective of accreditation. It seems to refer to exactly what one would expect from quality assurance: helping institutions to acquire the necessary conditions, improve processes, and increase the quality of outcomes. However, it is necessary to ask what is to be improved, in what way, and for whose benefit (p. 54).

In other words, educational leadership cannot become synonymous with bureaucracy or certifications. Improvements resulting from leadership in universities should be fostered by and for the real benefit of all members of the educational community: students, administrators, teachers, etc. In fact, educational leadership is nurtured by the constant relationships that are present in the contexts that are dedicated to training and aims to generate a deep and equitable change in social and collective conditions, it understands that education is a fundamental axis for social change, in order to improve equity, justice and quality of life. Authors such as Esquivel et al. (2018) complement the above by ensuring that leadership is associated with the transformation of a current reality to a desired situation through joint work and overcoming challenges, engaging all members of a community. Similarly, Pareja et al. (2012) add that an educational institution cannot depend on a single person, principal or director, to move forward and sponsor change, but must take into account the entire ecosystem that makes up the establishment to achieve that end. Furthermore, the authors emphasize that, by operating in this way, the trust and capacity of all members of the community is maximized in order to achieve collective goals.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

As previously stated, the culture of quality plays a fundamental role in educational leadership; however, its scope cannot be limited by mere certifications or accreditations, nor can it be sponsored only by a handful of managers. Consequently, higher education institutions are called upon to adopt, explore and develop a much more participatory and collaborative form of educational leadership, which can give rise to learning communities. According to Cuevas et al. (2019) universities must become learning communities, where professors and other members must work towards being knowledge managers. The concept of learning community, which should be considered as a clear example of educational leadership, since these groups use tools shared with their environment, with different levels of knowledge, experiences and skills, this, in order to build socially competent subjects, achieve common goals, seek better solutions to problems, etc.

On the other hand, it is necessary to emphasize that learning communities generate a change of culture, in which there is critical and constructive reflection on educational practice, and in which the environment in which the teacher develops as a professional is analyzed. In other words, these communities are a new way to reconfigure educational institutions, in which collective work and cooperation among teachers, as well as among other members of the educational community, are the key to improving professional practice (Bolívar, 2013). The idea of community is born as a possibility within the cooperation among professionals

to avoid individualism and promote problem solving from assertiveness, the main purpose is to learn to improve educational practice in a collective exercise leaving aside hierarchies and structures that prevent building the necessary conditions for the development of a culture of true quality.

Possibly, one of the most important elements to achieve what is proposed here is cooperation, since without this characteristic it is not possible to establish a “common mission” worldview, where decision-making and the distribution of responsibilities are features that define educational leadership (Pareja et al., 2012). Despite this notorious relevance, authors such as Cuevas et al. (2019) suggest that cooperation is a property that has not yet been fully established in the university context, due to the fact that an atmosphere of individualism still prevails in many higher education institutions, perhaps intentionally provoked by the autonomous way of working.

In summary, learning communities are a clear example of educational leadership as well as of a culture of quality put into practice, because it brings into play and involves all members of a community, benefiting students, teachers, coordinators, managers and administrators to achieve common goals, exploit and develop specific competencies and skills, establish an atmosphere where assertiveness, open communication and critical thinking prevail: students, teachers, coordinators, managers and administrators to achieve common goals, exploit and develop to the maximum specific skills and abilities, establish an atmosphere where assertiveness, open communication and critical thinking prevail, work cooperatively leaving hierarchies behind, harmonize learning processes and work environment, etc., thus ensuring solid improvements for universities to face and/or meet the various problems, needs, internal or external challenges that may appear.

FACULTY LEADERSHIP

As has already been repeatedly stated, all members of a university community have a significant role to play in educational leadership. However, it is necessary to make special emphasis on the role of the faculty, since these are the people who ultimately have direct and constant contact with the student body. Teachers are in charge of supporting, supervising, innovating, guiding, listening, training, setting an example, among many other functions (Lazaro and Hernandez, 2020). As a result, university professors exert a great influence in the life of the professional in training; therefore, it is not strange that many students see their teachers as leaders who evoke great respect and admiration. Lazaro and Hernandez add:

It is affirmed that teachers are essential agents in the ethical, academic and social growth of the student. Faculty leadership styles have varying levels of impact ranging from achieving effective learning to allowing the group to move autonomously, having completed freedom in decision making (p.3).

If an institution of higher education truly desires to possess a culture of quality, it must ensure that it cultivates ongoing faculty development since, in the end, faculty are the primary speakers of leadership with students both inside and outside the classroom. Again, a clear example of this situation is the University of Pamplona, which advocates “*teaching and academic excellence*” as the first of its six mission pillars. According to the University of Pamplona (2020), this pillar ensures university coexistence under a culture of quality and the construction of an institutional identity that favors the formation of a peaceful country through dynamic and transversal learning.

Finally, Lazaro and Hernandez (2020) refer to several distinctive traits of the teacher leader that are worth highlighting since each of them leads to multiple pedagogical benefits, among which the following stand out: permanent motivator, responsible, effective administrator, participatory entity, assertive communicator, constructive feedback, trainer of competencies, promoter of critical and reflective thinking, open to take into account the needs and interests of students, innovative, etc. Teacher leadership motivates teachers to simply want to do things in a better way, to be interested in their continuing education, to know not only how to recognize their qualities and defects, but also to overcome their weaknesses, that is, leadership influences educators to have a spirit of self-criticism in order to optimize their professional practice, improve their work and social context, and impact the lives of their students. After all, teachers are human beings in constant learning and, like educational leadership, will always be exposed to new challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, several aspects of importance in the development of this essay should be highlighted, first of all, the importance of universities in society, in terms of its development, evolution and economy, denoting scientific, technological and research progress, clearly influencing the training of professionals capable of facing the challenges and changing situations of that society in its context, Now, the challenges faced by universities, including the inclusion of new technologies and their combination with methodologies for teaching and learning, it is necessary to strive for institutional improvement actions in which the entire educational community is immersed, developing a set of competencies, which are later

strengthened and built through education and experience.

On the other hand, to emphasize that leadership is a process that integrates the interaction between several people, generates trust among the members of a community, deploys influence over others, takes advantage of the qualities, strengths and capabilities of others to delegate functions and achieve common goals; educational leadership also falls on the management and/or people who lead institutions, promoting what is imposed as a culture of quality and institutional improvement, that is to say that it is concluded that leadership can be supported in a search for quality, a scenario of this is the university and the people who are leaders in it, who in response to the constant processes of periodic evaluation, The leader immersed in the culture of quality in higher education institutions become learning communities, among them, professors, who in their role as leaders, work as managers of knowledge; generate a cultural change, reflective, critical, building on educational practice.

Finally, understanding the learning communities as a scenario for educational leadership and therefore a culture of quality put into practice, this text praises the subjects that strengthen, explore and develop to the maximum competencies and skills of all those who are part of the different institutions, with great influence on the lives of all and therefore allows us to affirm that the teaching staff is the main speaker of influential leadership to a professional critical spirit, improving the social context and impacting the community.

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