

Higher Education in 2050.

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The challenges faced by Higher Education towards 2050 are huge. On the one hand, it must respond to the dilemmas and demands resulting from social, economic and technological changes occurred over the past few decades; and on the other hand, it must incorporate the changes caused by the Pandemic in Higher Education.

In the first case, Higher Education has not only been besieged by the demands of the market and businesses, but also by the professionalization expectations of a growing number of students, substantially increasing the enrollment in Higher Education in Latin America and other regions of the world. The expansion of middle classes and their hopes for progress and social mobility have caused university and college enrollments to explode. The student population is different, varied, and so are their expectations and demands. In this first point, the challenge lies on how to reach a middle point. Without intending to instrumentalize higher education, the question is how these professionalization and employability demands should be responded to without overlooking the humanistic formation, the critical spirit, the ethics, and the pursuit of the common good.

On the other hand, the Pandemic has surfaced, in Peru and Latin America in general, the significant existing inequalities amongst students of basic and higher education. Online education was imposed as necessary, but it was not within the reach of the entire university population. Some universities were able to swiftly transform into a distance learning format, but many others were not as they lacked the platforms and the required capabilities to implement the system. However, the problem is not only about professors and universities. Many students do not have access to the internet and/or enough computers, tablets or smartphones to receive and participate in classes. Most households rely on a single computer, and this has made online education impossible, thus forcing students to drop out from universities and other educational institutions. This situation also involves the loss of jobs and the contraction of the economy, which have impacted on vulnerable sectors including the middle class. Poverty has increased, reaching the levels of ten years ago, at least in Peru. In this scenario, the dilemmas are more complex and so are the proposals as the gaps have grown wider.

Considering these two processes, still in progress, I present my proposals for the university that I wish for in 2050.

Keeping humanistic formation as an axis, focusing on the human being and the common good. This is not only about forming specialist professionals with highly technical abilities to be incorporated into an increasingly competitive and productive market. It is, in fact, necessary to form specialists and professionals, but what must be kept as a fundamental mission of higher education is the formation of persons with a

humanistic and ethical approach, and where emotions play a central role. It is key that this essential mission of the university be maintained and strengthened. It is, as pointed out by Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, about putting the people in the center of the development process. This requires an integral education, in which humanities, the arts, and the sciences are intertwined with the different areas of engineering, technology, and innovation to form competent professionals, with the ability to act ethically, and committed to society and the common good as a goal.

Gender equality. I dream of a university where men, women, and LGBTQ people can form part of a community where everyone respects one another and where discrimination, injustice, and intolerance are a thing of the past. This involves a higher education that makes room for various interests and where gender stereotypes are no longer reproduced in schools and disciplines. The different areas of engineering and science should open up to women in the same way as humanities, education and arts should open up to men.

I hope to find spaces without workplace and sexual harassment and free from gender violence. Higher education spaces are microcosmos that reproduce social problems, but at the same time these can be spaces for critical reflection on sexism and male chauvinist attitudes that imbue their campuses. The challenge is to transform the patriarchal ethos that marks higher education institutions from their foundation. The idea, mistaken by the way, that the production of knowledge is a male task should be questioned and transformed. All persons, regardless of their sex or gender identity, should be recognized and valued in the difficult and arduous task of building new knowledge and cutting-edge knowledge.

Inclusion of diverse knowledges, cultures, and social groups. For a long time, higher studies were a privilege of the elites. Nevertheless, economic and social changes promoted the expansion of higher education, causing the growth and explosion of the university population. Many groups from middle and popular sectors were able to enroll in universities to fulfill their dream of professionalization and social mobility.

However, such incorporation of different social groups has many issues yet to be resolved. On the one hand, the scarce presence of indigenous and native people is still noted; on the other hand, and perhaps most importantly, despite their inclusion as persons, their wisdom, culture, and experience remain excluded due to the fact that they are not regarded as knowledge. Their bodies enter deprived of their spirits and cultures. What is more, every now and again they must renounce them, thus raising the paradox that to progress they must give up their identity. A kind of violence that must stop.

In 2050, I hope that higher education is diverse, not only with regard to social groups, but also in terms of the knowledge coming from different cultures and experiences. We must learn to work and build knowledge in dialog. There are very limited experiences from intercultural universities and, in my view, these proposals should be broadened in such a manner that universities include these modalities. This implies the enrichment and democratization of higher education.

Commitment to society and ratings. I hope that by 2050 we will have overcome the rating frenzy. It is important to rethink the contribution of the university to society through the different areas, such as teaching, research, social responsibility. Universities should be committed to the public space; they should be a reference when it comes to facing different problems and attending to the urgent needs of the people, meaning that universities should stop taking part in the crazed race of ratings and publications in peer-reviewed journals. Scholars no longer have the time to determinedly dedicate themselves to teaching and regard research as a creative process, where students participate and information is processed through the discussion of different points of view. The image of a good researcher, currently being promoted, is the one with more publications in peer-reviewed journals, with good citations and of excellent quality. No one wonders what becomes of those articles, what immaterial and material benefits they bring to the people and communities in general. What is their contribution to the human development of persons and societies in particular? It is a matter still to be evaluated.

This race is causing professor communities within universities to disappear. The individual work, productivism, and personal success prevail. There is no time to rethink what we are doing or reconsider methodologies, changes, and challenges. There is only time to think about placing an article in a certain prestigious journal. It is worth mentioning that there are already a number of studies that point out the editorial interests behind this obsession about publications and peer reviews, showing the financial purposes and the non-academic arrangements being woven. The exacerbation of this trend must come to an end. It is about achieving a balance that impedes the hyper-specialization that is being generated and does not help much to think about a university committed to its surrounding community. Here, I must also mention the importance gained by mental health along this hyper-productivism and individualistic competition. In the university I dream of, well-being – in its broad sense – should be a key factor to be promoted and preserved.

Pluriversity. Flexibility and versatility: opening disciplines and university walls. I dream of a more free and less rigorous university, which can meet the different interests and demands of students, professors, market, communities, and society. At least in Latin America and in Peru, studies are extremely disciplinary and rigorous. It is difficult for a student to take several subjects at a time if these are not under the framing of faculties or schools.

I believe that there should be more flexibility so that learning can be possible not only within the different units of the university, but also outside its premises. The experiences now called extra-curricular subjects should be acknowledged as part of the education and not simply as an “extra”. The participation of professors and students in development projects, community experiences, indigenous institutions and organizations should be part of this open and creative learning. It is a requirement for opening up and learning in coexistence.

In this same sense, other “teachers” without academic degrees should be recognized as they could take part in the professorial staff due to their knowledges and experiences, based on other recognitions such as non-academic peers and expert communities.

This leads us to rethinking the strict and single-formatted accreditations, which fail to acknowledge interculturality and interdisciplinarity. By opening the university to the surrounding communities, everyone will win, and the gaps between the academy and society will gradually close. This, of course, does not deny that there are specialized spaces for those who require such formation. The idea is not to deny possibilities, but to open them. Online education will be added to the “in person” education without implying the subordination of either one to the other. It is about thinking about a deterritorialized, depatriarchalized, and decolonized university that can reach more persons willing to carry out the task of building knowledge based on respect, dialog, critical spirit, imagination, and the love for the common good.

How does this university contribute to better futures for 2050?

I believe that it contributes in many ways. Firstly, by strengthening the mission of a humanistic, ethical, and socially committed university, focused on the persons, we are fighting against one of the greatest calamities of today’s world: corruption. The different scandals at different levels around the world make us think that it is crucial to rethink the formation and education we provide. We must go back to considering the importance of an active and vigilant citizenship in university education.

Secondly, the critical spirit prepares the students to take the information received with a distance and criterion and how to use it. Under the formation we propose, the persons will develop a reasoned and emotionally committed judgment, allowing them to confront “fake news” and enabling them to give contrary opinions to a majority based on prejudices, untruths, or ignorance.

Thirdly, by integrating different knowledges, groups, and cultures, we form empathetic persons who respect the different knowledges, recognizing their limits. This will help to banish the stereotypes and, over time, discrimination.

It will not be easy for inequality to disappear within the next few years, but the foundations of its legitimacy and reproduction will surely be subverted.

Finally, versatility and flexibility will provide us with better tools to face a world, which characteristics are difficult to imagine today. They talk about an extremely digitalized society, with drones and robots, in which uncertainty is the only certain thing left by the pandemic. And, it is precisely a higher education that opens its walls and works - in respectful and horizontal dialog – with the different social institutions what will prepare us to handle such complexities and uncertainties.