
THE CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITIES: GOVERNANCE MODELS AND THE REINVENTION OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION

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Abstract

The objective of this document is to present a set of reflections on some of the challenges that public universities currently face. Higher education is becoming an increasingly competitive market due to the greater dynamism of private universities and, also, the potential emergence of new actors that can have a decisive influence in this area. The text focuses on two critical dimensions for the future of the public university system: on the one hand, its regulation, governance and management model and, on the other hand, the need to reinvent the teaching function of face-to-face public universities, as one of the most relevant sources of social legitimation. The new profile of students entering the University and the technological transformation demand a new paradigm that modifies the traditional teaching dynamics, which is currently one of the weakest links in higher education centers.

Keywords: University, higher education, university teaching, governance, management, competitiveness.

JEL classification: I20, I23.

I. THE SURVIVAL OF UNIVERSITIES AT STAKE

Universities (there are an estimated 25,000 in the world) live comfortably on the solvency that comes from having a monopoly on higher education and the strength of being the oldest institutions in the world, along with the Catholic Church. The oldest university in the world was established in Morocco (Fez), the University of Al Qarawiyyini, whose foundation dates back to 859. Some purists believe that the oldest university is a Chinese university founded in 259 (Nankin), but it cannot formally be considered as such as it did not grant an official degree and its function was to prepare students for the entrance examinations to the Chinese civil service of the time. The oldest university in Europe is Bologna (1088), followed by Oxford (1167) and Cambridge (1209). The oldest in Spain is the University of Salamanca (1218), although the first was the University of Palencia (1212). Every university, even the most recent, feels protected by these historical precedents. It is obvious that private universities are mortal, as they can disappear at any given moment, like any private company would if it is not positioned well in the market. But public universities tend to feel invulnerable and immortal because they are part of the apparently inalterable and invulnerable public institutional framework.

In today's world, this sense of permanence is very unrealistic. Technological, economic, social and political transformations are creating a sense of widespread instability which universities (private and public) should also see they are a part of. What is new is that from now on the environment of public universities will be turbulent and they will have to face new and unprecedented problems and challenges, and it is not obvious that with their current institutional capacities, they will be able to face these new uncertain scenarios. Some experts in prospective analysis have dared to claim that 90% of the world's universities could disappear in the next twenty years. This is undoubtedly an exaggeration, but in the face of this predicted disaster, we should reflect on the matter. Let us take a few examples of the contingencies that could threaten the survival of traditional universities:

- New technologies are transforming the teaching models in higher education through virtual training. The university with the largest number of students in Spain is the UNED (the Spanish Open University with around 145,000 students). It should also be noted that a regional and formally open university such as the *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya* (UOC) has 31,000 students. In the past, distance learning was a residual and complementary activity to in-person universities, but thanks to the technological changes open universities are becoming very competitive and internationalized. A good example of this is South New Hampshire University (US), a distance-learning university that has gone from having

around 2,000 students to 180,000 in the last 18 years and is expected to reach 300,000 in the next three years (during the pandemic alone, the number of students increased by 40,000 and the number of staff by 1,000). Its success lies not only in the fact that it is a distance-learning university but also in its innovative method of personalized training, which creates customized training itineraries for each student following a personal interview with one of its more than 300 counsellors and filling in a questionnaire developed in collaboration with Google. Some recent studies suggest that universities that do not opt for a hybrid teaching model (in-person and online) have little chance of survival.

- Companies, especially the most innovative and emerging ones (currently those involved in infoeconomics and shortly those linked to the development of artificial intelligence), are becoming less and less obliged to abide by official university degrees. These companies are only interested in the real skills of their future employees, and these skills can also be acquired through non-formal training, which in many cases is provided by some universities, but also by many non-university institutions.
- Accrediting universities are emerging, they do not directly teach a degree but merely officialize unregulated training that citizens have acquired on their own (through Massive Open Online Courses –MOOCs– or through courses in organizations outside the university system). Some employers consider these degrees to be as competitive, if not more so, than those offered by formal institutionalized in-person universities.
- Large companies linked to info economics (notably Google and Amazon) are expanding their business strategies by penetrating new sectors that were previously considered to be shielded, thanks to protectionist principles, *e.g.*, selling medicines. These types of companies have stated that one of their fields of greatest commercial interest is education and, in particular, higher education. With the arrival of these global companies to the world of higher education, the paradigm shift may be spectacular, and the traditional universities may be left in a marginal position.
- There are large corporations that are not at all satisfied with the contribution of universities in providing professionals with the skills that the market demands. It is a classic divorce between a good undergraduate education and a merely instrumental education. We agree that universities should not only train good professionals, but that their essential function is to train good citizens. It is therefore logical

and even healthy that there should be a certain divorce between what companies want and what universities offer. But in recent years this gap has widened and the distance between the market and the university market (especially the public one) is abysmal. The power of the market could be imposed in the short term. There are already many industrial groups that are creating their own universities, and even in conservative and highly regulated countries such as Spain, they can experiment with these initiatives. SEAT, for example, is considering setting up its own university. In this case, SEAT will not talk and negotiate with the university authorities, but directly with the education authorities responsible for secondary education, which could decide to validate higher education outside the traditional university system, as will be explained in the following discussion. If there is a serious confrontation between the education authorities and the university authorities, there is no doubt who will win the battle: the education authorities. There is a growing perception that universities and their authorities live in an idealized, endogamous and corporate world that is poorly attuned to the real world. Beware that it is not only the market that can take away the fragile monopoly of public universities but also our governments.

- Linked to the previous point, there is a growing interest on the part of governments in having vocational training in higher education. It is evident that an advanced country requires trained workers both at the university level and at a high professional and instrumental level. Higher vocational training is attracting more and more students and is achieving a positive link between education and the labor market through dual training systems, sharing traditional training with internships in companies. In this sense, there is a need to deepen and extend this higher vocational training so that it can reach a degree equal to or similar to a university degree. The High-Level Training Cycles are going to be more and more solvent and will claim a space in the higher education sphere next to the universities. Until now, public universities have closed their doors to this option due to old-fashioned classist and elitist reasons. But the dilemma in the near future is clear: either public universities embrace higher vocational training (we could say higher plus) or outside the university system there will outcrop new official public and private degrees equivalent to a university, as it is already beginning to happen in the field of art and design due to the universities' neglect of this type of profile.
- Another new policy promoted by governments is the provision of lifelong learning through a strong offer of specific and shorter courses to update and recycle working professionals (also known as microcredentials). It is

clear that a relevant part of this training should be provided by public universities, but not all of them will be flexible enough to offer this new training, nor will they have the capacity to understand the real needs of the labor market and offer truly attractive and timely courses. In this new field, public universities may find themselves competing at a disadvantage with private universities or with private academies that are specialized exclusively in providing this type of training.

- It is well known that traditional universities are highly competitive but this competition tends to focus on research activities and output and the negative externality of this trend is the neglect of teaching. Teaching, which is the source of social legitimacy and public funding for universities, is increasingly becoming a residual activity at a time when serious competitive threats are emerging. It is no coincidence that in recent years a significant number of new national and international private universities have appeared on the university scene, which we at the public universities regard with suspicion and even disdain and superiority because those centers do not carry out research. This is true, but perhaps these centers pay much more attention to teaching, with an instrumental orientation of a professionalizing nature that is increasingly attractive to upper-middle income families. In Spain, for example, 25 years ago there were only sixteen authorized private universities; today there are 43 (compared with 50 public universities, the last of which was created in the distant year of 1988). Over the last twenty years, the number of students enrolled in private universities has tripled, while the number of public universities has fallen by 14%. Today, 30% of students who study at university in Spain do so in private universities. It is striking that the public university system is losing ground to the private system. This is no small matter since it means that a significant part of the upper-middle class prefers private universities to public ones, even though the difference in cost for families can be as much as six times higher. Why do so many families make this economic effort to avoid public universities? Two hypotheses could explain this phenomenon: on the one hand, they believe that the teaching in private universities is of higher quality and more rigorous than in public universities. This is strange as the research production of public universities is overwhelmingly superior to that of private universities, or perhaps this is the reason, and there is a part of society that perceives public university lecturers as heavily involved in research and with little effort in their teaching. On the other hand, they may believe, rightly or wrongly, that private universities are much closer to the business world and focused on providing professionals for that business world. Additionally, they believe that public universities do not have this focus and prioritize the training of educated and critical

citizens. In this sense, it is paradoxical that studies on the employment of the future proclaim that the most competitive skills in the current and future labor market will be the capacity for critical analysis and an education that combines different disciplines, in which the humanities should have a relevant presence.

- Everything seems to indicate that the only lifeline for public universities is research excellence. But this lifeline is also very weak because they compete in a very dynamic and changing research market. On the one hand, public administrations themselves have in recent years encouraged the emergence of large research centers outside the universities, and on the other hand, there is increasing private investment in research, which tends to take place outside the university systems. The perceived strength of public universities in research could be rapidly diluted in the coming years.

As a corollary, changes in the university environment from now on will be sudden, unpredictable and unprecedented, and will require new institutional and organizational capacities. The combination of climate change, environmental crises, greater social inequality, new social demands (equity, sustainability), new public health challenges, rapid advances in artificial intelligence, demographic changes, etc., will create multiple unprecedented crises in the immediate future for universities accustomed to stability and routine. The current institutional and organizational capacities are clearly insufficient to address these immediate, medium and long-term challenges with any degree of robustness.

Experts in the history of higher education have likely identified various moments in history when these institutions found themselves at crossroads that were difficult to overcome, and that they emerged from them unscathed and even stronger, without having to introduce any changes. Many may think that the current crisis is just another phase that will be overcome without much difficulty. Universities tend to have an almost Vatican-like conservative culture, born of the sense of invulnerability of centuries-old and almost millennial institutions that have hardly needed to introduce any changes to survive over time. But they are probably wrong now. The current changes and those that are rapidly approaching will create a disruption that will lead to a new way of managing knowledge, new formulas for basic, intermediate and higher education, etc. Emerging technologies, the information society and the future society of artificial intelligence and robotics are challenging many economic and social actors who up to now had played the role of intermediaries. The technology-empowered society will be able to access certain services directly, without the need for intermediaries. Some institutions and organizations will just disappear and new ones will emerge with larger size and a more global

scope. Universities are only intermediaries between students and knowledge, between young people and certain labor markets. This privileged position of universities is now being challenged, and perhaps even more so in the future.

We still lack the necessary vision to know what institutional and organizational texture universities will need in order to survive all these profound and radical changes. Probably no one can foresee it today. What we can be sure of, however, is that the current model of governance, organization, and service provision of most universities is outdated. This model certainly seems to doom us to failure, but at least it presents us as failures with great potential. Systems of knowledge transmission that have remained almost unchanged for the last thousand years (perhaps the tentative changes we have seen recently, with the European Higher Education Area's competency model and the COVID-19 pandemic, have been the most significant in a millennium) and have a baroque, fragmented, complex and corporatized system of governance and organization. A self-complacency with a supposed internal democracy that is rather ineffective, impervious to social demands and that follows guild interests and demagogic whims. Therefore, all the efforts we can make now, before the arrival of the great change that is coming, to simplify our organizational models, to practice with the transformations aimed at being contingent and adaptable, to be more understandable in our functioning for the society and the economy, etc., will be essential efforts to stand a chance in the future for our institutional survival. This persistence is not guaranteed for any university but those that show the greatest capacity for adaptation, transformation and innovation will have the best chances of success, and the rest will probably be swept away by the new times.

This text will not discuss all the challenges facing contemporary universities but will analyze only two points that can be considered particularly critical: on the one hand, the governance model of university systems and universities themselves, and on the other hand, the need to reinvent the teaching function, which, in general terms, is one of the major deficits that many universities currently exhibit.

II. REGULATION AND MANAGEMENT MODELS FOR UNIVERSITIES

Private universities have the advantage of having the independence to use the organization model they see fit and are free to transform themselves according to the new demands of the environment, their needs and new priorities. Obviously, they also have to comply with public regulations,

more or less strict or lax depending on the country, which try to guarantee minimum quality standards. Therefore, mediocre private universities suffer from this public regulation, but quality private universities are hardly affected by this regulation and enjoy enormous real autonomy to define their strategies, their financing systems, their areas of specialization and market positioning, and their management models.

Public universities, on the other hand, are usually subject to much stricter and more thorough public regulation, in line with their public status and because they are funded by public administrations. This public regulation is very different in each country and the key elements are the following dichotomies: (i) the regulation tends to standardize all public universities in a country or, on the other hand, respects and even encourages diversity of strategies and models; (ii) public funding is uniform (all universities receive the same based on student enrollment) or asymmetric through various incentives to promote excellence through orderly competition; (iii) public regulation is very intrusive in the functioning and management parameters of universities or, on the other hand, respects university autonomy and therefore the capacity for self-organization; and, iv) the governance model imposed by the regulator has a democratic or meritocratic character in the election of academic positions in universities.

Regarding the first vector of uniformity or diversity, in most of the more advanced countries, there has usually been a transition from uniform national models to models that are more open to diversity. Public regulation tends to have a strong tendency toward standardization, but in recent years and in many countries, this orientation has relaxed in the face of a reality that has become much more complex. It does not make sense to think that a single set of institutional rules can cater for the diversity that exists in reality: universities with an international vocation vs. universities with a local vocation, universities located in large metropolitan areas vs. universities located in small peripheral towns, universities with a research vocation vs. universities more geared towards teaching and professionalization (colleges), polytechnic universities vs. generalist universities, etc. The conclusion is that countries with regulations that continue to be anchored in standardizing parameters have university systems of lower quality than those that regulate according to the different roles taken by each university.

The second key issue is the public funding model. Here, too, there is usually a natural inertia towards standardizing the funding of all universities in a national system, by providing the same subsidy based on the number of students enrolled. This is the institutional and political option that creates the fewest problems and tensions in national university systems. However, this egalitarian logic runs up against the diversity described in the previous point, since it is clear that funding

should take into account the status and role of each university and, in particular, the results obtained, as their financial needs are very different. It is obvious that research-intensive and/or internationalized universities require more resources than universities with a local and professionalized vocation. It is also clear that more technical universities need more resources than generalist universities. On the other hand, egalitarian funding models do not create incentives for healthy competition among universities, which is what fosters excellence. Egalitarian funding models are not stimulating and promote mediocrity in university systems. It is also true that pure models of totally egalitarian funding do not exist, since there are usually different funding mechanisms depending on whether the degrees are more or less technical, whether the universities have large campuses or historical heritage, whether they are located in more complex or depressed areas, etc. In any case, despite the differences in funding, these systems are conceptually egalitarian, since they do not take into account results and performance, and therefore continue to fail to create incentives for universities to be more competitive and achieve excellence. Therefore, the most appropriate model for the current context is an asymmetric funding system based on incentives according to the results achieved by universities in teaching, research and knowledge transfer. Some countries have gone a step further and decided to overfund some universities in order to make them more competitive at the international level and to achieve prominent positions in international rankings. In many countries, this strategy of privileging some universities is considered anathema, but their university systems will never have world-class public universities. It is therefore necessary to establish a system of asymmetric funding based on the achievement of objectives and on national strategies aimed at excellence and, in order to avoid misgivings, the model should be fully transparent and based on a constant process of accountability through solid indicators.

Another critical issue is whether national regulation should be more or less intrusive in imposing governance and management models on universities. In some countries, regulation is so intense and precise that it goes so far as to undermine the classic principle of university autonomy. The critical issue here is whether a university system is mature or immature. In mature university systems, the starting point is the principle of trust between the principal and the university stakeholders. In these cases, the regulation of university governance and management is very lax or almost non-existent. The strongest idea is that each university governs and manages as it sees fit, according to its needs and projects, under the university's autonomy. As a counterbalance to this freedom, universities must respond with transparency and strict accountability. On the other hand, in immature university systems, the principle of mutual distrust between the regulator and the regulated universities is installed, and the regulator is usually intrusive and determines how universities should be

governed and managed, preventing them from being dynamic and contingent. A country with excessive regulation in this area will inevitably have universities that are unsound, outdated, and poorly adapted to the contingencies of the environment. Excessive regulation fosters the immaturity of universities, as they limit themselves to doing the minimum required by the client, without being able to innovate their strategies, either because of the regulatory framework or because they feel they cannot do anything new and therefore will not leave their comfort zone.

Derived from the previous point, the last major dichotomy concerns the governance model inside universities: a democratic model or a meritocratic model. A third option would be a hybrid model that would allow both options in the same university system (the case of Portugal). In many countries, there is a tradition that education (primary, secondary and higher) is based on democratic principles that are channeled through the community (in some cases, such as primary and secondary education, the community is the teachers, and in universities, the community is usually the faculty, administrative and service staff and students), who elect their academic positions (rectors, department heads, deans, etc.). The model of democracy (either by direct vote or through collegial bodies) in the election of academic positions is very seductive to members of the university community, both symbolically and operationally. But this is usually a deception since the university democratic logics tend almost inevitably to degenerate into corporative, demagogic and unprofessional dynamics, and consequently into universities that are totally incapable of designing solid, innovative or disruptive strategies. Universities are very complex organizations (according to the organizational literature, the most complex organizations are hospitals, prisons, and universities) that, for their good governance, require academic positions with managerial competencies and a wide margin of maneuver if they want to be contingent and face new challenges. The democratic model tends to promote institutional misgovernance, facilitating short-sighted corporate logics decontextualized from the social function of the university in an increasingly complex and turbulent environment. The alternative model is meritocracy, where academic positions are elected based on their managerial competencies and governance projects. This is the path followed by universities and university systems in countries such as Denmark, Finland, Austria, Holland, France, Portugal, etc. France and Portugal are particularly noteworthy, as they are countries that are very attached to traditional models but are showing a capacity for evolution. Spain, on the other hand, is clearly not part of this migration towards meritocracy in university management. The meritocratic election of academic positions, especially the figure of the rector, should not shock anyone, since there are various mechanisms to promote this initiative in public universities without having to involve a selection process that the university community perceives as an imposition of external actors (be

they political, institutional and/or socioeconomic). The meritocratic system only requires that candidates for academic positions do not run only based on their internal academic category, but that they opt for the position on the basis of a curriculum in university management and a well-elaborated proposal for a government project. Both university lecturers and candidates from outside the university can apply for the position of rector, *i.e.*, it is not always necessary that the rector come from outside the university. The other ingredient is that the evaluation of the candidates is carried out by an *ad hoc* committee specifically created for this purpose. The composition of this committee can be very different: notables or seniors from the university, persons elected by the university community, external rectors or former rectors from prestigious universities, notable persons from the socioeconomic environment, etc. In any case, in this model the rector's selection committee must have a refined composition and internal counterbalances: part of the members should be elected internally, another part by the university's lecturers with the most merit, and great care should be taken in the selection of members from outside the university. These should be people of recognized prestige in the transversal field of knowledge management (powerful lecturers from other national or international universities, prestigious former rectors, institutional and business members who accredit knowledge and skills in knowledge management, etc.). A commission with a mixed composition of personalities from inside and outside the university is a good combination because it achieves internal legitimacy and also external legitimacy of an academic and social nature. In this framework, the new rector is more empowered and freer from corporate, academic and union captures.

The countries with less advanced university systems, on the other hand, tend to opt for the democratic model and are caught in a paradox and vicious circle: with this system of election, the regulator encourages corporatism and endogamy in university governance and, precisely to fight against endogamy, designs all kinds of barriers to the ability of universities to autonomously define a strategy and alternative management models for each university, such as the barriers and filters imposed on the faculty selection processes. It does not seem that the most advanced universities and university systems are going down this path, but rather just the opposite: election of the rector from outside the university itself to free him/her from internal capture and greater autonomy in the ability to design a strategy and a management model of its own, accompanied by powerful accountability.

The transition from a supposedly democratic model to a meritocratic one is complex since university communities are usually enthusiastic about their democratic model for electing academic positions. In this case, as mentioned earlier, the concept of democracy is clearly devalued and is a complete

imposture. This system pleases the university community as it encourages all kinds of corporate (faculty), trade union (administrative and service staff) and demagogic (student body) logic. The much-vaunted celebration of democracy basically consists of *de facto* forcing candidates for academic positions (especially the rector) to design clientelist networks among the lecturers of the different academic disciplines to defend corporative and endogamic positions that have little to do with the good performance and social value that the public university should have in its frontispiece. These clientelist networks also ensure that the rector has no real power, but rather that his/her function is merely transactional between the different corporate interests that prevent decision-making with his/her criteria and strategic vision. For the administration and services personnel, the democratic game consists of establishing an auction among the candidates aimed at maximizing benefits and minimizing the labor obligations of the management personnel. For students, the democratic cover consists of the demagogic excitement of a few highly mobilized students in the face of the indifference of the great majority. Student demands usually cover a wide range of reasonable proposals, extravagant but innocuous proposals, as well as proposals that are perverse for the proper functioning of the university. Being a rector in this model is relatively easy: listening to all demands, even if they may seem outlandish; making it clear that you are going to govern by seeking broad consensus, which is a way of stating that you will not take any strategic and delicate decisions; being empathetic; and being very clear that your role is not to govern the university but to mediate between different interests trying to satisfy everyone, even if it is to the detriment of the quality of the system. This is the endogamic model, which accepts meritocracy (the election of academic positions headed by the Rector) only incidentally and exceptionally. It is normal to elect as rector the candidate who is the most conciliatory with the various internal interests, the most sympathetic and, not infrequently, the most demagogic. Rectors choose as vice-rectors the representatives of the various sources of power between departments and disciplines. Strategic vision and good management skills are often marginalized. The endogamic model generates radically conservative dynamics, and the essential function of elected academic positions is to maintain the corporate status quo. The rector is not empowered, nor does he or she want to be. It is clear that this general rule has its exceptions and that there are universities that have escaped this perverse logic and have managed to present and elect very serious rectors with highly professional teams. In these cases, the changes in leadership teams are not traumatic and there is great continuity in their strategies. These exceptions usually occur in small universities that enjoy social peace. But even in these universities, there is always the fear and uncertainty that this good work will be interrupted at some point by unforeseen events and that some extemporaneous candidate will succeed and break this dynamic of institutional stability, reasonable incremental reforms, and solid strategic vision.

As per the example of the Spanish university system, which is still anchored in the democratic model, it is a symptom that the CRUE (Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities), which is the lobby group of all the rectors in the country, does not strive for more university autonomy but, *de facto*, less. The CRUE discreetly but vehemently demands more standardizing regulation from the state and the regional authorities in order to maintain a certain internal order in their respective universities. The rectors reject the possibility of making strategic and compromising decisions, expecting the public regulators to do the hard work. It is clear that this endogamic, corporate and impotent model of governance is not the most appropriate for the transformation and renewal of universities.

III. REINVENTING UNIVERSITY TEACHING

We are aware of the need to reinvent university teaching since this is the dimension in which a significant number of public universities show the greatest weaknesses and which makes them particularly vulnerable to the increasingly intense competition from a wide variety of actors, many of them emerging, who participate or will participate in higher education. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the training of students to become good professionals and better citizens is the vector that gives universities their greatest social and institutional legitimacy.

University lecturers tend to show some professional schizophrenia when faced with the institutional requirement to attend to both teaching and research with a more or less balanced intensity. This duality becomes even more complicated when we add the need to cover the so-called transfer of knowledge and the obligation, at certain professional moments, to perform tasks related to academic management. The professional juggling of four spheres usually leads to situations of professional stress and, depending on one's ability, one or two or even three balls may fall on one or two of them, and only one (which tends to be Research) can be safely kept.

In any case, the critical dimension is the complex coexistence of research and teaching. In general terms, there is an almost universal set of incentives in the university environment that favors research over teaching: rankings give weight to publication in indexed journals, faculty evaluations linked to tenure or promotion tend to be almost exclusively channeled into research capabilities, internal power dynamics favor research in the symbolic and instrumental dimension, etc. The result of this combination is the insignificance of the teaching

function in the portfolio of university lecturers: the main function of a lecturer is research, and teaching is considered an additional task, an annoying burden (in Spanish the term of teaching duties is *carga lectiva* or teaching burden, which is rather revealing) to be carried out with more or less thoroughness depending on the personal voluntarist or militant dynamics with teaching and attention to students. The result of all this is to be expected: poor quality of teaching in most public universities. Something is not working, for example in the Spanish public university system, the percentage of students choosing a private university has been steadily increasing in recent years (currently 18% and rising). Private universities no longer act only as a refuge for students who do not achieve sufficient marks in the entrance system, but also attract a considerable number of students with high marks.

On the other hand, teaching has become much more complex in recent years. Students born in the new millennium are completely different from the students from a few decades ago. They have changed conceptually from orderly and disciplined scholars, in the most mediocre cases, and disciples, the most brilliant ones, to infantile schoolchildren and listeners, who are extraordinarily demanding with their university tuition but not very strict with themselves. We do not want to fall into the recurrent lamentation that today's students are worse than those of the past, but simply to note that they are radically different and that they require greater efforts in the teaching work carried out by university lecturers. Keeping the attention and motivation of today's students is a complex task, since they no longer operate in the traditional student/teacher roles that allowed for passive and conventional teaching methods, but now demand active and varied teaching methods. Another relatively recent novelty is the so-called Bologna learning model, of Anglo-Saxon inspiration, also recently implemented in the more traditional universities, which implies less theoretical density through traditional lectures and more practical teaching strategies that allow the emergence of the so-called transversal competencies and skills. This is a new learning model, much criticized by traditional lecturers, but we must celebrate it as it is proving successful in those universities that have implemented it seriously and robustly. Metaphorically speaking, we have moved away from a classical model in which students were like geese or ducks, stuffed with a huge amount of doctrinal nutrients, producing graduates with deep theoretical knowledge, but only the smartest and most self-taught had the skills that made them attractive to the labor market. In contrast, the new learning model assumes that students should play an active role in their education and most of them graduate with remarkable skills and competencies in analytical, presentation and rhetorical skills and, for the most active and self-taught, also with great strength in theoretical knowledge and skills. Today's job market is in a constant state of flux due to technological changes and an increasingly turbulent environment. This labor market prioritizes professionals with the

ability to manage knowledge and adapt to change and undervalues theoretical knowledge acquired through formal education.

The conclusion of all these considerations is clear: we are in a period of increased demands on the teaching dimension of university teachers, just at a time when they are drifting away from teaching because of the incentives and obligations stemming from their research, which requires a very high intensity of dedication, sometimes bordering on full-time dedication. Reinventing and strengthening teaching in this context are not an easy task, especially if one wants to preserve one of the positive externalities of the current professional university model, the strength of research. If we want to remain competitive or even more solvent in terms of research, while at the same time strengthening the teaching function, this aspiration is akin to the utopia of squaring the circle. We believe, however, that there is still a long way to go to improve teaching through a series of strategies that are presented and proposed below:

- To establish the obligation that in order to achieve the coveted tenure or to move up the career ladder, it is essential to have a good record not only in research but also in teaching quality. If the requirement is doubled, the faculty will be able to present a neat professional portfolio in both dimensions.
- To strengthen the institution of the Dean's office by promoting their active participation in the selection and promotion processes; giving them effective control over the faculty teaching performance through annual evaluations; and even granting them the ability to veto bad teachers.
- To prevent senior faculty with greater teaching competence from fleeing from the compulsory subjects of the degrees and taking refuge exclusively in electives or master's degrees. This situation is quite common in universities since the compulsory subjects require greater dedication due to the large number of students enrolled in each class and the greater difficulty students have in learning these subjects. It is common for students in the first years and in most of the compulsory subjects to have lecturers who are inexperienced in teaching skills (lecturers at the beginning of their professional careers or part-time external lecturers, as in the case of associate lecturers). The alternative would be to force and/or incentivize the most outstanding lecturers to teach some compulsory subjects, especially in the first years. In fact, this could be established as an obligation (quite difficult in the current system of corporate management and organization under which universities operate) or there could be a new incentive scheme aimed at

achieving the same result, in which teaching a compulsory and massive subject is properly weighted in the lecturers' teaching dedication or giving professional prestige to teaching these subjects by establishing meritocratic requirements to be able to teach them, such as *sexenios* or *quinquenios*¹ and good teaching evaluations. If teaching in the first years and in compulsory subjects implies greater professional prestige, the majority of teachers will aspire to teach these subjects.

- Teaching is a complex activity that has attributes of an almost artistic nature (ranging from performing skills, in their capacity of collective seduction, to interpersonal skills, for seminars and individual tutorials), but also of a strictly technical and professional nature in the mastery of a given subject. For this reason, it makes sense to ask whether a good teacher is born or made. There are professional activities that cannot be successfully developed without the ingredients of vocation and innate abilities. This is often the case with teachers as lecturers, and certainly as researchers. This means that there will always be lecturers who, without any prior preparation or training in teaching, become excellent teachers through spontaneous generation linked to practice. There is also the reverse possibility: people who aspire to be teachers and try to learn teaching techniques and skills, and fail because they lack oral communication, leadership, or persuasion skills. But in most cases, in the Gaussian bell, the best strategy is for universities to propose systems of training on teaching skills for younger teachers and retraining for more experienced teachers. Training both in the classical dimensions (communication, voice and breathing, dramatization) and in innovative and alternative formulations of learning systems. At present, these training dynamics are relatively well established in universities and, in many cases, encouraged by the new regulatory framework.
- A good system for overcoming the problems of the lack of dedication and motivation in teaching that university teachers may have could be to overcome the traditional dichotomy between research and teaching. University studies in social sciences (and in other disciplines) could learn from the learning dynamics that have long been implemented in technical fields such as architecture, where subjects are linked to extensive and in-depth theoretical and practical research projects carried out by students under the supervision of faculty. In these cases, the teaching function consists in promoting research and in producing as a result scientific documents created jointly by the teaching staff and the students. Another possibility would be to expand knowledge in the use

¹ In Spain *sexenios* and *quinquenios* refer to six- and five-year periods respectively of evaluation, recognition and compensation of research activity carried out by lecturers.

of teaching innovation techniques that involve other disciplines outside the walls of pure and simple pedagogy. In a professional career in which the publication of papers is an essential condition, both material and almost a fetish, the creation of communicative vessels between teaching and research could be a successful strategy to achieve feedback between these two functions, leaving aside the traditional zero-sum dynamic between the two activities. Another strategy that could promote greater complicity between teaching and research is for each discipline to have a scientific space, through specialized journals or other means of publication, where studies and analyses of teaching innovations related to the different scientific fields can be published. These contributions should be institutionally valued with research incentives, teaching incentives or knowledge transfer incentives.

Some university systems have been designed according to the principle that a lecturer must have and develop a balanced activity between teaching and research functions. In general, this is a good axiom, but in practice, it creates an imbalance in favor of research and to the detriment of the quality of teaching. There are more and more new demands in both teaching and research that strain the amphibious dimension of the faculty with many staff members being unable to maintain a more or less balanced rhythm between these two commitments. If we add to the demands of research and teaching those of knowledge transfer and the inevitable constraints of university management, handling so many dimensions can be very difficult and complex. The rigid seams of our university system tend to be emasculating but they can occasionally be burst by stimulating a greater commitment to research, with researchers who demonstrate greater success in this activity being freed from the demands (“burdens”) of teaching, management and knowledge transfer. This dynamic is spreading in our university system because it is favored by career incentives and also by economic incentives. These exceptions are corporately accepted but, on the other hand, there is no tolerance for exceptions that would weight in the teaching function, the management function or the knowledge transfer function. Our system is bursting at the seams not only in terms of research, but also in terms of teaching requirements (especially in this function), management (university management is becoming increasingly complex and requires greater specialization and professionalization) and knowledge transfer (the weakest side of the university polyhedron). Therefore, it may be worth considering whether some faculty should specialize more in teaching, management or knowledge transfer functions, and thus not be penalized by promotion and reward incentive systems, but rather recognized for doing so.

The university system is now so complex that it is impossible to balance its different lines of production with standardized individual demands on its faculty, but the only way to achieve some balance as a system, is to make it more

flexible and permeable, in certain cases, to some specialization of university faculty in each of its four main competencies. For this essay, the conclusion is that it should not be anathema for some teachers to choose excellence in their teaching activities and that they can be recognized and respected at the professional and institutional levels for this specialized commitment. A public university of the future can be seen as a flexible and dynamic organization in which the majority of its faculty members fulfill their obligations in research and teaching, but in which there is a percentage that is more oriented towards high-intensity research (as is already the case today), but which also keeps the doors open for greater specialization in teaching, knowledge transfer or management tasks. Only mixed models will be competitive in the future, while uniform models will be in crisis in an increasingly competitive context both within and outside the public university system.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

This paper has tried to show that in recent years universities have been experiencing the most important exogenous and endogenous transformation of the last few centuries. The university is an institution that feels well established and secure in its social, economic and institutional environment. This has been the case throughout its long history, but this sense of comfort has already changed and will change even more in the coming years. Public management theorists argue that since the COVID-19 crisis, the university context is now officially turbulent and public authorities have to deal with unexpected, surprising and unprecedented problems, requiring new models of governance and management that integrate drivers of stability but also of change and transformation (a new model they call robust governance). This is a difficult but unquestionable oxymoron: on the one hand, it is necessary to have a stable governance and management model to ensure legal and institutional security and the effective and efficient management of structural public services. On the other hand, it is essential to have contingent and variable management areas capable of absorbing the new problems and demands associated with a turbulent context. This is the crossroads at which public universities find themselves today. Today, the university (traditional and public) has literally its survival at stake and is mostly unaware of it. The university is a giant with clay feet. The last major change that the public university had to face was the transition from an elite university (5% of society) to a mass university (30% of society). This great change took place in our country in the early 1970s. It was an important but conceptually irrelevant transformation since it only entailed dealing with quantitative dimensions: more students, more lecturers, more infrastructure and, therefore, more funding. With that mutation, the

university was socially legitimized since it began to work as a social elevator (and, therefore, ceased to act as a system of reinforcement of the social elites). In fact, in the 1980s, a university degree almost guaranteed employability in a job with a certain quality, in a country with a very complex and deficient labor market. Today, universities can only guarantee that 5% of their graduates have a quality job with a certain level of pay and stability. The public university as a social elevator is currently rather out of order. On the other hand, the private universities ensure that the social elites, even if they produce mediocre and unproductive offspring, maintain their position of social privilege. Many want to go up in the social elevator, but there is not much room left when there is hardly anyone to get off in the context of a labor market that is increasingly restrictive in offering quality jobs.

Everything seems to indicate that the future of higher education will be very plural and fragmented, abandoning, at least in Spain, the former monopolistic logic based on public in-person universities. On the one hand, distance learning universities (private and public) will have a greater presence in the market. On the other hand, we will see the emergence of new universities that are hardly recognizable as such, but which will participate in higher education, such as corporate universities linked to large companies and universities oriented to specific student profiles (for example, the aforementioned South New Hampshire University is a higher education center that has specialized in training ex-military personnel from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq). Additionally, vocational training (higher vocational education) is pushing for a place in higher education and is struggling to fit into the traditional university model. In this sense, it is noteworthy that there is an increasing percentage of students who, after obtaining a university degree, do not choose to pursue a master's degree, but instead, choose to complement their studies with a higher vocational training course. This dynamic of diversity and a certain amount of chaos will be inevitable regardless of whether the public regulation of higher education is more restrictive or more liberal, since the success of these new actors in higher education will largely depend not on public regulation, but on their level of acceptance by the market and society. A market and a society undergoing profound changes, looking for new professional profiles and new mechanisms for their successful placement in a convulsive and confusing labor market resulting from the technological revolution 4.0.

Now, the public university is facing a perfect storm of profound changes that challenge its central position in the higher education system and its transcendence in its impact on the labor market. It has been argued that the exogenous changes are profound and of potentially high impact, while the endogenous transformations are still tentative and superficial. However, these signs of change in the internal functioning of public universities should

not be underestimated, since the most relevant element is that they have voluntarily initiated a process of transformation. Public universities are shaking off their slumber regarding their internal governance model and are initiating transformation processes with modest but complex changes at the corporate level, those are positive signs. This is the way to go, and the legislator in higher education should support it. It would be a good idea for higher education legislation to be plural and flexible, abandoning its traditional conservative and uniform framework. Uniformity implies betting on a single model that will surely lead to the failure of the entire public university system. At a time of profound change, it is foolish to put all our eggs in one basket. The regulatory framework of the public university should be opened up so that each public university can define its own profile: universities wishing to maintain the current model versus universities committed to research and postgraduate and doctoral programs, universities oriented towards certain student profiles (universities with a purely professional orientation versus universities with a more cultural and interdisciplinary vocation, etc.). We must ensure that the public university can be as diverse as society and the market. The public university must be flexible and contingent, able to adapt quickly to changes in its environment (a dimension that only private universities seem to possess today). Only through diversity and flexibility will the public university of the future be able to preserve its social value, accompanying society (and especially the most vulnerable part of it) in navigating a technological, economic, labor and social sea that is dynamic, unpredictable and therefore tempestuous. To finish this discussion, we present a summary of nine proposals for the transformation of the various university systems:

1. *Adapting to the new lifelong higher education.* The strategies promoted by the European Union and by the new Organic Law of the University System in Spain (the last university law approved in a relevant country) show the need to reposition universities and to better connect them with society. This is a wake-up call to the elitist positions and inertia of the sector. For example, a major dilemma is emerging for the near future: either public universities embrace higher vocational training (we could say higher plus), or official public and private degrees equivalent to a university degree will appear outside the university system (this is already beginning to happen in the field of art and design, due to the neglect of this type of profile by universities in some countries).
2. *Increase funding for university systems and avoid a "one size fits all" approach to distribution criteria.* All public universities need more resources. However, the mere addition of more and homogeneously distributed resources would be a suboptimal and even destructive maneuver if the goal is to transform universities. The strategy of

university rectors should be to propose new strategies, transformations and improvements in their internal organizational systems in order to convince policymakers of the good use that universities will make of public resources and their potential positive impact on society. Then it is legitimate to ask for more funding, certainly through individual program contracts for each university, but not before. The idea is simple: strategy, change and results first, then more money.

3. *Simplifying the organizational model.* We must try to avoid systems that are too complex and which we have simply because of the desire to have all the organizational tools available to universities at the same time: departments, schools, campuses, doctoral schools and university research institutes, to which we must add various public and private foundations, consortia, etc. The incentives to choose the most complex model are obvious: the more organizations, the more positions, and hence the continuity with the feudal and smallholder dynamics that characterize the university culture. In any case, a variable architecture with various governance and management models is an opportunity for each university to organize itself according to its role, identity and preferences. There is empirical evidence that public universities operating today are very different and therefore require specificities in their academic governance.
4. *Avoiding neo-bureaucracy in management.* University systems are increasingly complex and are subject to national and international accreditation and evaluation systems. The ability of universities to award official degrees and/or achieve prestigious ranking positions that allow them to access international student markets depends on exceeding these quality standards. These evaluation agencies tend to impose excessively detailed academic management processes that can degenerate into a perverse neo-bureaucracy that should be avoided as much as possible, since it limits the capacity for autonomy in the rapid innovation that some universities can foster.
5. *Exercising autonomy in hiring faculty and accepting the consequences.* Each university must autonomously choose the faculty profile that best suits its interests and be accountable for its results through a system of positive and negative incentives defined by the financing model of the university system, for which the administrations are responsible as coordinators and funders of each territorial system.
6. *Faculty diversification.* The faculty should be composed of professionals with both research and teaching skills, although they may specialize

later in their careers. It is necessary to establish a commitment that in order to achieve the coveted status of tenured faculty or to move up the career ladder, it is essential to demonstrate good performance not only in research but also in teaching quality.

7. *Acknowledging the value of teaching.* Incentives for university faculty should be linked to the quality of their teaching and should be truly selective and competitive. In other words, only those faculty who have truly excelled in teaching should receive them, *i.e.*, those who have received very high student evaluations, shown special commitment to different learning systems and innovation in their teaching methods, etcetera.
8. *Leveraging the talent of top lecturers.* Prevent senior faculty with greater teaching skills from fleeing the mandatory subjects of undergraduate degrees and taking refuge exclusively in electives or master's degrees.
9. *Linking teaching and research.* Establishing communication vessels between teaching and research can be a successful strategy to achieve feedback between these two functions and to leave aside the traditional zero-sum dynamic between the two activities.