Higher Education as a Concept of Common Good: The Challenge Posed by UNESCO

La Educación Superior conceptualizada como Bien Común: El desafío propuesto por UNESCO

A Educação Superior conceitualizada como um bem comum: o desafio proposto pela UNESCO

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Abstract. The 2015 UNESCO's call for the conceptualization of Higher Education (HE) as a common good opens doors to a new perspective for the understanding and search of a solution to a set of problems stemming from its increasing privatization. For this call not to remain as a mere speech and be able to produce a real transforming impact, it needs to reflect on the theoretical and practical implications of this new way of conceptualizing HE. A new theoretical framework and practical tools need to be built so as to migrate from the current forms of HE governance, designed to manage a public good, towards the specific forms of governance of common goods. This document discusses UNESCO's call as having a solid theoretical foundation, for which a bibliographical review on the theory of the common goods is performed, demonstrating that Higher Education can be, indeed, considered as such. This work reflects, also, on the impact of this re-conceptualization on the governance of HE and on the changes to be introduced to it. This work concludes suggesting that the theoretical and methodological framework of University Social Responsibility contributes a base on which to build those changes.

Resumen. El llamado de UNESCO de 2015 a conceptualizar la Educación Superior (ES) como un bien común abre las puertas a una nueva perspectiva para la comprensión y búsqueda de solución a un conjunto de problemas derivados de su creciente privatización. Este llamado, para no quedar en el discurso y producir un impacto real transformador, requiere reflexionar sobre las implicancias teóricas y prácticas de esta nueva forma de conceptualizar la ES. Se necesita construir un marco teórico y herramientas prácticas que permitan migrar de las formas actuales de gobernanza de la ES, diseñadas para gestionar un bien público, hacia las formas específicas de la gobernanza de los bienes comunes. En este documento se argumenta que el llamado de UNESCO tiene un sustento teórico sólido, para lo cual se realiza una revisión bibliográfica sobre la teoría de los bienes comunes y se demuestra que la ES califica para ser considerada como tal. Además, se reflexiona sobre los impactos que esta re-conceptualización tiene sobre la gobernanza de la ES y sobre los cambios que se necesita introducir en ella. El documento concluye sugiriendo que el marco teórico y metodológico de la Responsabilidad Social Universitaria aporta una base sobre la que edificar esos cambios.

Palabras Clave:
Educación Superior,
Bienes Comunes,
Gobernanza,
Responsabilidad
Social Universitaria.

Resumo. A convocação da UNESCO de 2015 para conceitualizar o ensino superior como um bem comum abre as portas para uma nova perspectiva de entendimento e busca de uma solução para um conjunto de problemas decorrentes de sua crescente privatização. Esse chamado, para não permanecer no discurso e produzir um impacto transformador real, requer refletir sobre as implicações teóricas e práticas dessa nova forma de conceituar a ES. É necessário construir um arcabouço teórico e ferramentas práticas que permitam migrar das atuais formas de governança do ES, projetadas para gerir um bem público, até as formas específicas de governança dos bens comuns. Neste documento, argumenta-se que a convocação da UNESCO tem uma sólida base teórica, para a qual é feita uma revisão bibliográfica sobre a teoria dos bens comuns e é demonstrado que o ES se qualifica para ser considerada como tal. Além disso, reflete sobre os impactos que essa re-conceitualização tem sobre a governança do ES e sobre as mudanças que precisam ser introduzidas no mesmo. O documento conclui sugerindo que a estrutura teórica e metodológica da Responsabilidade Social Universitária fornece uma base sobre a qual construir essas mudanças.

Palavras-chave:
educação superior,
bens comuns,
governança,
responsabilidade
social universitária.

The document entitled "Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?" (UNESCO, 2015) proposes for the first time to shift from conceptualizing Higher Education as a public good to understanding it as a common good. UNESCO proposes doing so as response to the need of a solution to the problem of its increasing privatization. Even though private Higher Education always existed (mainly in universities that respond to religious orders and community associations), the current importance of the phenomenon is given by its "scale, scope, and penetration" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 79).

For this call to go beyond mere speech and be able to produce a real transforming impact, it needs to reflect on the theoretical and practical implications of this new way of conceptualizing HE. A new theoretical framework and practical tools need to be built to migrate from the current forms of HE governance, designed to manage a public good, towards the specific forms of governance of the commons. The purpose of this document is to provide some ideas that contribute to the discussion on this topic.

The document is structured in the following way. The first section reflects on the problem of the increasing privatization of HE. The second is a brief analysis of some of its current problems that contribute to or are a result of privatization processes. These problems, as it will be argued later, could be addressed more effectively if HE is conceptualized as a common good, than if it is continued to be seen as a public good that the public or private sector manages. The third addresses various theoretical aspects related to the concept of common goods (commons), including an analysis of different goods that this concept covers and some critical aspects of their governance. The fourth provides foundation of why it is correct and useful to conceptualize Higher Education as a common good, based on the concepts discussed in the previous section. The fifth proposes some ideas about how the conceptual framework of common goods, particularly the specific principles of their governance, can contribute to the solution of the problems currently affecting Higher Education. Finally, the sixth suggests that the University Social Responsibility theory includes, without being aware of it, an approach to governance and university management on which the shift towards Higher Education conceptualized as a common good can be based.

The Problem of the Increasing Privatization of Higher Education

UNESCO defines the privatization of HE as "the process of transferring activities, assets, management, functions and responsibilities relating to education from the state or public institutions to private individuals and agencies" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 79). Even though UNESCO states that this privatization may have some positive effects, such as a wider range of academic programs, it also has negative effects, such as posing a threat to the universal access to the right to education, which is a fundamental human right that allows the realization of other

rights (UNESCO, 2015). It is also one of the main tools for generating equal opportunities in the contemporary society. Therefore, it is noted that this phenomenon "could have a negative impact on the enjoyment of the right to a good quality education and on the realization of equal educational opportunities" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 80). An additional privatization problem, pointed out by Figueroa (2016) referring to the proposal of UNESCO, is the exclusion of citizens from the decision-making processes on the use of public goods linked to education.

Kranich (2016) situates the problem in the specific field of knowledge creation and dissemination. In this regard, she points out that "many of the previously available academic resources in libraries are now closed" (Kranich, 2016, p. 109). "This even happens with online contents that are currently restricted, encapsulated, and packaged" (Kranich, 2016, p. 109). To explain this phenomenon, Kranich mentions the enclosure of the commons related to knowledge and performs a brief historical analysis on how an increasing appropriation process began since the last quarter of the 20th century. In this regard, she points out that:

Public information was privatized and classified, journal publishers merged, and copyright laws were modified in response to corporate pressure, changes in political rhetoric, the rise of a global economy, the adoption of new technologies, and the simplicity to copy digital files (Kranich, 2016, p. 108).

According to Kranich (2016), this situation conspires against the development of research and innovation, since "researchers have always needed a free and open access to ideas to make knowledge flourish" (p. 107).

However, this privatization phenomenon is not limited to the type of institution that manages Higher Education, it also includes the problem denominated by Hoevel (2015) the "arrival of business university", which basically consists of the conversion of the university into a company. Hoevel assigns two types of causes to this phenomenon. On the one hand, there are economic causes, one of which is globalization. Even though this model always existed (on a very small scale), "the market was so heavily regulated by the State before that its pressure on the university was limited" (Hoevel, 2015, p. 48). However, when the "fierce market competition" unfolded along with globalization, it was necessary to apply the same adaptation and adjustment measures present in the rest of the economic agents to the university. Globalization led to an increased commodification of institutions traditionally non-economic, such as museums, clinics and hospitals, football clubs, and educational institutions.

On the other hand, Hoevel argues the existence of cultural causes. According to him, "a cultural and educational ideal that was the center of the universities existed at all times" (Hoevel, 2015, p. 49). In the Middle Ages, the purpose of the university was the intellectual training; in the Renaissance, the humanistic training; and, in the 19th century, the focus was set on science education. All of these concepts had an ideal target for the university. However, nowadays, it is not possible for Hoevel to find a proposal for what the ideal or value for the

education must be. For that reason, he concludes: "Thus, the university's weakness facing the market is not only due to the power that the latter has acquired, but to the culture's weakness to the so-called 'weak thought' that prevails in the university" (Hoevel, 2015, Pitts of public and private universities to companies has also been identified by Brunner and Miranda (2016).

It is important to note that the debate on the privatization of Higher Education is reductionist in the sense that it does not distinguish between nonprofit and for-profit private institutions. Universities founded and managed by religious orders and various types of community associations belong to this last category. In particular, it must be reminded that the first universities were created by different orders of the Catholic Church, and, from those beginnings to the present, the raison d'être of Catholic universities is to contribute to their evangelizing mission rather than to generate economic income.

Likewise, Higher Education of public order deliberates on its main function (teleological orientation) and the survival in the 'market', focusing the debate on the existing dichotomy between the origin and destination of the public and common goods in a co-management framework. For that reason, it is worth wondering: Higher Education at the service of whom and for what purpose?

In short, as stated by UNESCO (2015), "the nature and degree of private engagement in educational provision is blurring the boundaries between public and private education" (p. 84). This institution mentions three examples that illustrate this: (a) the increasing dependence on private funding; (b) the increase in for-profit and nonprofit private Higher Education institutions; and (c) the implementation of business methods in management.

SOME OF THE CURRENT MAJOR PROBLEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Problem of State Funding

The tensions emerged between the two recent World Congresses on Higher Education conducted by UNESCO have shown a change of focus towards the latent concern for its funding (Calderón, Vargas & Pedro, 2011). We are witnessing a crisis in the ability of the States to deal with a Higher Education system that requires an ever-growing volume of financial resources, in a context where the States' ability to provide those resources has decreased. In this respect, the UNESCO document (2015, p. 83) states: "The primary responsibility of states in the provision of public education is increasingly being contested with calls for reduced public spending and greater involvement of non-state actors."

The expansion of enrollments, the emergence of new fields of research, and the growing sophistication of technologies used in research processes largely explain the need for a higher financial income. However, the difficulties to achieve efficiency in the use of resources or the necessity to face new costs also explain it, as in the case of prices imposed by the academic

publishers that concentrate a significant part of the journals' publishing. With respect to this last issue, Kranich states:

> At the beginning of the 1990s, merges in the academic publishing sector had let a few international conglomerates take control of it, overburdening the already tight budgets of Higher Education institutions by the imposition of subscription fees of up to $20,000 for journals such as Nuclear Physics, Brain Research, and Tetrahedron Letters, generating profits of up to 40 percent (Kranich, 2016, p. 110).

This situation generates the need to obtain new funding sources in public Higher Education institutions. For this purpose, they must rely on funding from the private sector, either by the collection of student tuition fees (in some cases through scholarships funded by private foundations and companies), as by competitive funds, building alliances with private companies to develop research, welfare, and extension projects, as well as the sale of services to the corporate sector. As a result of these survival strategies, at least two new problems arise: Universal access to study in public universities is limited, and the determination of the research agenda content is shared (or directly subordinated) with the corporate sector. In this way, the financial problem risks a loss of sovereignty to Higher Education institutions.

Moreover, the growing difficulty of the States to fund Higher Education accelerates the privatization process by creating spaces for the development of a private provision of education and research. Most notably, the difficulty of public universities to respond to the market demand for new professions arises, because States sometimes lack the funds needed to fund it, leaving the way open for the private sector, now in charge of offering new professional programs. In the case of research, the reduction of public funds limits the action fields, delimits the research lines, and amplifies the flight of scientists towards the corporate sector or universities with greater economic resources (usually private), all of which ends up negatively affecting the quality and relevance of the generated knowledge. Moreover, the reduction in funding also stimulates functional behavior towards funding allocation mechanisms in researchers (for trips, hiring assistants, etc.), which are often detrimental to that quality and relevance. All of this creates opportunities for private universities, many of which have greater flexibility and expertise to find funds in the corporate sector and the various institutions that finance research.

Therefore, the difficulties to obtain funding from States promotes and stimulates the privatization processes in Higher Education by three converging paths: (a) through the creation of spaces for private provision; (b) through a higher degree of subordination to the private sector interests, both the market (in the case of the curriculum offering) and the companies and private foundations that fund research; and (c) because it promotes and legitimizes the adoption of the management (and university) model proposed by the Business University.

For these reasons, Brunner and Pedraja (2017) indicate that the commodification of Higher Education does not only refer to the rise of private universities, but also involves the public ones, since the funding of education systems are changing the traditional public universities map.

Problems in the Educational Function

It is possible to identify at least four current problems of Higher Education in its basic educational function: (a) its difficulty to provide access and strengthen the permanence in equal conditions to all sectors of society; (b) the problems in its quality; (c) the increasing lack of relevance in its provision of professional training programs; (d) the abandonment of the humanistic training components (mainly those related to ethics) in their curricula; and (e) the uprooting of relationships and social integration.

The problem of access is already noted as one of the first consequences of privatization processes. Since the 20th century, there is a global consensus (at least in the West) that education is a fundamental human right. Even in Western societies, the universalization of its access (in terms of creating equal opportunities for all citizens) quickly increased its objectives, starting with the elimination of illiteracy, to then gradually raise the stakes to the obligation of completing primary education and then secondary education, to currently reach universal access to Higher Education. Despite this, the achievement of this last objective is being conditioned, mainly due to the increased difficulties of States to finance public universities, which gradually reduces free university education.

The quality problem goes hand in hand with the mass use of Higher Education in a context of financial constraints. In that sense, Brunner and Miranda (2016) argue that, due to the mass use, a significant number of teachers do not meet the minimum requirements for graduate studies or educational training. At the same time, mass use in some knowledge areas has resulted in over-qualifications of human capital and unemployment. An interesting example of this situation relates to the university. Together with the growing demands in some ratios used to measure their quality, universities (mainly in developed countries) have oversized the creation of doctoral programs, often with the only aim of improving performance indicators. As a result, these institutions are giving doctorate degrees to people that do not get employed as professors or researchers in universities or that, at best, get precarious or low-wage jobs as in the case of "associate professors" in public universities or the "works and services contracts" in private universities. A way out of the problem for these people is emigrating to countries with fewer people with doctorate degrees, as in the case of Latin America. Clearly limited resources were used in their countries of origin that were not applied on their own societies.

The third problem is the relevance of the curriculum offering. The reduction of funding is adversely affecting the ability of universities to respond to the new demands of university education. Several studies have drawn attention to this issue (Infosys, 2016; Knowledge@ Wharton, 2016). For example, the Future of Jobs Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Global Challenge Inside Report (World Economic Forum, 2016) mentioned one of the most important issues that this gap may present in the short-term future: The so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution. Within the framework of this revolution, digital environments where machines are communicating with machines are generated, and new products supplement the current ones to be connected to the global internet. This requires the creation of new professional profiles according to technology competencies in order to have access to that labor market (Organization Economic Cooperation Development, 2016).

Private universities are taking advantage of this difficulty of public universities, given that they usually interact more closely with the corporate sector, identify more quickly the new market needs, and can define the competency profiles that the changes require. Its greater flexibility facilitates the design of new professional programs, and its relationship with the corporate sector works to achieve the employment of new graduates.

Finally, there is the problem of the humanistic training downturn in favor of technical training. Hoevel (2015) says that "the teaching of the sciences, arts, and professions has gradually fallen into mechanization, losing its humanistic core and its spiritual dimension" (p. 49). In the same vein, UNESCO (2015) states: "It is important to emphasize that the recent shift from 'education' to 'learning' in international discourse signals a potential neglect of the collective dimensions and the purpose of education as a social endeavor" (p. 85).

In the current context, in case of requiring to adapt to the market demands for funding, public and private universities are removing content and methodologies on humanistic training in favor of technical contents and the methodologies that are used to convey them. In this way, the development of moral, social, and citizen awareness competencies is being neglected, which will result in professionals prioritizing their personal interests with little awareness of their social and citizen responsibility. All of this limits the possibility to have leaders committed to an inclusive and sustainable development in the future, which is one of the major goals of humanity at the dawn of the 21st century.

Problems in the Research Function

The enormous legitimacy that the international rankings and accreditation systems have reached comes from the growing competition between universities to obtain funding and attract students, mainly graduate. These accreditation systems, and the variables used to build university rankings in particular, have generated (probably unintentionally) a set of incentives

for institutions and academics, of whose consequences there is a growing awareness.

Peter Lawrence (2008), a prestigious English biologist, argued that the metrics used to measure scientific production are based on the accessory (impact factors of journals, number of citations, etc.) and not on the important (content and contributions of the published works). Lawrence warns about the danger that, based on these measures, decisions are taken on issues such as obtaining a place (or the permanence in it) or the access to a doctoral scholarship. Therefore, Lawrence concludes:

"(…) scientists have been forced to lower their primary objective of making discoveries to publishing as many articles as possible and trying to publish them in journals with high impact factors. As a result, scientific behavior has been distorted and the article's use, quality, and objectivity have deteriorated (Lawrence, 2008, p. 9).

On his part, Frey (2010) identifies three forces that undermine the academy: (a) the ranking mania; (b) the intense pressure to publish that academics receive (particularly in indexed journals in certain indices); and (c) the increase in misconduct and fraud. The first is causing that indicators external to the university determine the scientific research content: "Today, in many disciplines, the importance of a scientific idea and the scholar's position are defined by rankings" (Frey, 2010, p. 2). The second is generating a major distortion in the academic production, since the incentives to publish do not go in line with the creation of new valuable knowledge and, in particular, undermine the academy mission to pursue "true knowledge" (Frey, 2010). In the case of the third (a consequence of the previous two), Frey argues that the main cause of this situation is not the fact that "academics are less moral that they used to be", but the fact that "the incentives to cheat have greatly increased due to a greater stress in the academy." In 2002, Frey had already been blunt in his diagnosis, stating that the survival of researchers within universities strongly depends on publishing in journals reviewed by anonymous peers, which has led to their intellectual prostitution, since they adjust the contents of their articles to the demands of the reviewers and scientific journal publishers (Frey, 2002).

This situation was analyzed by Tsui (2015) in the particular case of academic production in business schools. Tsui mentions three negative consequences of the growing submission to the rankings' demands and the pressure for publishing: (a) the existence of a widening gap between research and knowledge application; (b) the promotion of morally questionable research practices; and (c) the homogenization of research. The first explains why the main motivation of academics shifted from the useful knowledge production for companies to obtaining the approval of the journal publishers and reviewers (Tsui, 2015). The second includes practices, such as "retaining the methodological details, selectively reporting results, using ideas of other researchers without giving them recognition, avoiding comments in order to improve the statistical results, and even fabricating results" (Tsui, 2015, p. 19). Tsui also mentions the creation of "communes for article publishing," which are intended to increase the

number of articles published by each of its members. The third consequence derives from the adoption of methodological approaches, theories, and content according to the preferences of the journal's reviewers and publishers. This in turn reduces the space for new ideas (Tsui, 2015).

On his part, Di Maggio (2016) analyzes the impact on the production in the social sciences field: "Doctoral students of social sciences are rarely socialized by their thesis directors or their tutors in understanding the importance of producing research that is useful in the real world" (p. 4). He adds that their published works "are completely ignored by politicians, because they are written in an arcane and brimming-with-jargon language; they are never written considering readers outside the tiny club of political science insiders" (Di Maggio, 2016, p. 5). Di Maggio also mentions the problem of the methodological approaches in the social sciences with the ones present in "hard" sciences. He also denounces the obsession of many political experts with the use of sophisticated mathematical tools without considering the qualitative relevance of the published results. To illustrate this idea, he transcribed some exotic titles of articles that add nothing to the political science knowledge.

In the case of Latin-American universities, the hegemony of the agendas and research methodologies imposed by academic journal publishers, as well as other dysfunctional behaviors resulting from the need to comply with the requirements of accreditation agencies located in developed countries, represent, according to Altbach (2016), a neo-colonialist model to subjugate the knowledge production to external standards and benefits. In particular, this situation makes Latin-American universities deviate from the fulfillment of their social responsibility to contribute to their territory (Grau, Goddar, Hall, Hazelkorn & Tandon, 2017).

In summary, the need of universities to obtain good places in the rankings generates a set of personal and institutional incentives which, in turn, produce at least the following negative impacts on their scientific production: (a) a gap between research and knowledge application; (b) a research agenda that responds more to the internal logic of evaluation systems than to the search of responses to social needs (even the funders' needs); and (c) the spread of immoral practices that end up affecting the quality of research.

COMMONS AND THE PROBLEM OF THEIR GOVERNANCE
The Commons

The term "commons" was created to analyze the emerging problem of sustainability in the use of some natural resources (water, air, etc.). Over time, it began to be used to refer to a broader range of goods, including several services that allow fulfilling fundamental human rights. For example, Barlow (2008) noted that many modern societies expanded this concept, covering what is known as "common social fields," which include health, education, or social security.

The application of the term "commons" to a variety of problems and its approach from different perspectives has complicated its conceptualization to the point that the World Forum on Globalization proposed the existence of three types of commons: (1) the set of natural resources on which the life of mankind depends (e.g. water, forests, fish, air, the ozone layer, etc.); (2) the collective creations of mankind (e.g. culture and knowledge); and (3) social goods (those that guarantee universal access to health, education, and social security) (Gutiérrez & Mora, 2011). In line with this, Subirats (2011) proposes:

> "We would be referring to goods, resources, that, apart from the ownership, assume, through their own economic nature, functions of social interest, directly serving the interests, not of public administrations, but those of the community and the people in it" (p. 196).

Based on the above, it is easy to deduce that it is a concept under construction. Gutierrez and Mora (2011) identify three types of definitions, categorized by the way commons are conceived in them: (a) only as resources; (b) as a social relationship (between resource and community); and (c) as a political relationship. In this third definition, the policy proposals related to the governance of commons are included. These authors include the following definition of this third category:

> Commons is understood as a concept that gives meaning and direction to a policy proposal and that places us in three essential issues: (1) the access to resources and goods that constitute our social, natural, and cultural heritage; (2) the social production and reproduction process of both commons and the Common Good; and (3) the equitable distribution in the sharing of benefits that emerge from our common acquis (Gutiérrez & Mora, 2011, p. 132).

While private goods are owned individually (by a person or an organization), and public goods are owned by the State, commons are the property of the community. For that reason, while the right to the use of private goods is legitimized by their purchase in the market, and the right to the use of public goods is legitimized by being a citizen (and, in some cases, by paying fees like the toll for driving in a road), commons are used without having to pay any price (this happens with the air we breathe, sea water, natural landscapes, etc.). In other words, commons are the goods on which everyone has the right of use by the mere fact of being part of mankind or a particular community. In this regard, UNESCO (2015) defines them as "those goods that, irrespective of any public or private origin, are characterized by a binding destination and necessary for the realization of the fundamental rights of all people" (p. 85).

Moreover, as Subirats (2011) notes, in the case of common goods, one cannot speak about a specific type of property, but the opposite of property, and concludes:

> "What is common is not marketable (transmissible, alienable) and cannot be subject to individualized possession. (...) We do not 'have' a common good, we are part of what

is common, to the extent that we are part of an ecosystem, a set of relationships in an environment (...) and the subject is therefore part of the object. Common goods are inseparably linked and unite people, communities, and the ecosystem itself" (Subirats, 2011, p. 197).

According to Barlow (2008), in "the past years, important advances have been made in the generation of a renewed awareness of the old concept of ´commons´" (p. 3). However, there is confusion between public and common goods, since both share the universal access feature, in other words, the non-exclusion of anyone regarding their use or consumption. However, while the use of the first is independent among users (i.e., there is no rivalry between them), with the commons, the advantages obtained by some can be to the detriment of others and even deny them access. For example, while the use obtained by the road user (public good) does not affect the use of other users, in the case of water or air (common goods), the abusive use of some limits the access of others, both new and future generations. In addition, no citizen can appropriate the squares and parks of their city; meanwhile, some actors can appropriate social common goods like education and knowledge, setting limits on their universal access. In the case of academic knowledge, payments are needed to read papers published by certain journals that not all researchers could afford. In the case of education, in some countries, even public universities charge tuition fees to study in them.

In that sense, Zamagni (2014) points out that the existing difficulty to properly conceptualize the notion of common goods is, among other reasons, the usual confusion between common and public goods. In this regard, he states:

> The common good, in contrast, is rival in consumption, but not exclusive. It is a good in which the utility that everyone gets from its use cannot be separated from the utility that other people get from it. It would be like saying that the benefit obtained by an individual from a common good is materialized with the others', and not against or irrespective of the others' benefit (Zamagni, 2014, p. 26).

Thus, in the case of Higher Education, for instance, this confusion has led to the very widespread idea that the State is the most suitable actor to manage it.

One of the specific characteristics of this kind of goods can be inferred from Zamagni's words: Its use depends on the existence of reciprocal relationships between the users. With that in mind, Sanchez Enriquez (2014) argues that common goods are produced and obtained through relationships between individuals and groups and, therefore, "they are a product of interacting relationships" (p. 3). Hence, such goods "do not exist outside of our relationships." Moreover, as indicated by Zamagni (2014), "the benefit obtained by an individual from a common good is materialized with the others', and not against or irrespective of the others' benefit" (p. 27). Thus, some authors argue that commons are none other than a social relation.

Another interesting feature of the commons is their transgenerational aspect (Figueroa, 2016), in the sense that they belong to both current and future generations, the current and the future community. This is the basis of the idea of the sustainable use of environmental resources. According to Figueroa (2016), this feature "implies that they cannot be managed in terms of individual rationality or have 'profit' as the aim" (p. 1).

It is important to note that the concepts of "common goods" and "the common good" differ in meaning, since both refer to different phenomena, as Subirats (2011) states: "We are not talking about a moral issue (the common good), but about specific management and maintenance systems of social and environmental resources" (p. 198). While common goods are concrete entities (tangible or intangible), the common good "is the welfare of communal life and the significant relationships between people" (Zamagni, 2007, p. 23); that is to say, a moral issue, a universal value. After mentioning various common goods (beauty, peace, art, culture, freedom, etc.), Argandoña (2011) states: "All of these can be 'common goods', which somehow embody the abstract and transcendent concept of the common good, but does not deplete it" (p. 5).

The common good is not equivalent to the so-called "general interest" either because, as indicated by Zamagni (2007), "it is the welfare of the people who live and are joined in society", not the "indistinct welfare of society" (p. 24). Or, as pointed out by Argandoña (2011), "being common does not mean being owned by some or even by the majority; common goods are owned by everyone at the same time" (p. 3). In line with this idea, the Social Doctrine of the Church, one of whose four principles is the common good, indicates that this does not consist in:

"The simple sum of particular goods of each subject of the social body. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains common because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it, and safeguard its effectiveness" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005).

In summary, the common goods do not coincide with the common good nor the general interest; however, their governance and use require consideration of the general interest and contribution to the common good.

To sum up, it is possible to point out some specific characteristics of such goods: (a) they are universally accessible, which means all members of the community have the right to access to them; (b) the use made by some members of the community can adversely affect the access of others; (c) they are owned by the community (not public nor private), which means that those who "own them" are not in fact their owners and, therefore, its use must be functional in its nature; (d) they are relational goods and, therefore, they are produced and used within the framework of relationships between individuals and groups; (e) they are transgenerational,

which means their production and consumption require guarantees of sustainability; and (f) its use requires consideration of the general interest and contribution to the common good.

Finally, it is important to point out that the specific identity the commons requires: (a) forms of governance that ensure that their production, reproduction, distribution, access, and consumption do not go against that identity, and (b) that the community they belong to is involved in their governance.

The Tragedy of the Commons

The American evolutionary biologist Hardin (1968) argued that the commons are doomed to be plundered and depleted because of the absence of an owner interested in preserving them. In other words, the absence of an owner (private or public actor) leaves no guarantees for the accessibility and sustainability of such goods. To support this claim, Hardin uses the metaphor of the common pasture, where each herder grazes their animals. According to this author, if some herders try to maximize their use by increasing the number of animals, grass (common good) consumption will exceed the maximum supported for the system to regenerate and, consequently, its sustainability will be threatened. The only way to avoid this is if other herders agreed to waive their right to use the pasture, which threatens accessibility. This problem is known as the "tragedy of the commons."

Hardin's reasoning can explain the current environmental crisis that is leading to the destruction of the natural common goods. However, it also applies to the other two types of common goods proposed by the International Forum on Globalization: The collective creations of mankind (among which is knowledge) and social goods (education, for example), although in both cases the commons drama manifests itself in a different way. In this case, it is not about their destruction, because all of them can be renewed since they are human creations. The problem here lies in the exclusion to their access and, therefore, their denial as common goods. Even though no one disputes in our societies that education and health are universal rights, we have not yet found the way to guarantee universal access to them. Similarly, on the basis of the discussion on free software (Bollier, 2008), the problem of access to knowledge arises, which is also now considered a common good.

Two approaches to deal with the tragedy of the commons prevail. On the one hand, we have the privatization solution proposed by Hardin (1968), which is based upon the assumption that the market mechanism ensures the optimal allocation of public resources. The problem here is that this mechanism requires freedom to sell and to buy. But the reality is that there is an asymmetry between sellers and buyers, since not all individuals possess the resources to buy, which means they do not have the freedom to do so. Moreover, as Zamagni (2014) warns, this occurs because the "goods (or services) indispensable for survival do not have more or less

perfect substitutes" (p. 31). This situation leads to exclusion from access for those who cannot afford the cost. Consider, for example, the case of the access to university programs for those who cannot afford tuitions or the researchers' access to academic publications that require payment. In both cases, there are no substitute goods and, therefore, people that cannot afford their prices will be excluded from accessing them. Also consider that if the good's owner gives priority to maximizing its use, the situation is even more serious.

On the other hand, we have the statist solution, through the conversion of the common good to a public good, which has several problems. Zamagni (2014) identifies two of these problems. The first is funding, since States have limited financial resources in a global context where the demands of various actors and the challenges multiply. States of the 21st century are increasingly less able to afford the costs of ensuring fundamental rights, such as food, health, education, and social security.

The second problem is what Zamagni (2014) calls "government failures," among which stand out bureaucracy and rent seeking. Bureaucracy is a failure mainly derived from the "agency problem" (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), which occurs when the agent (person who manages the State) prioritizes their personal or corporate interest above that of the owner (the community of citizens). For example, the quality of education and knowledge production are affected by nepotism, the personal search for prestige or the multiple strategies that teachers and researchers develop to circumvent rules that hinder their professional careers.

Rent seeking consists in manipulating public resources in order to obtain individual or corporate benefits. According to Pasour (1987), the term "rent seeking" is used to describe attempts to obtain and maintain wealth transfers from the State to individuals or organizations, including a wide range of activities, among which are tax exemptions, union demands, tariffs and import quotas, fun allocations for research projects, and education subsidies. For Buchanan (2008), this type of behaviors of individuals and groups, aimed to maximize the appropriation of value, "generate social wear more than social surplus" (p. 56). That is why Pasour says that:

> "(...) the increase of specialized pressure groups is a key factor in the drop in the economic growth rate of nations, which joins the criticism of this widespread phenomenon in which organized groups use the State's power for the furtherance of their own economic interests" (Pasour, 1987, p. 123).

Corruption is the extreme form in which the agency problem and rent seeking play out.

Because of this difficulty (or impossibility) of private and public systems to solve the problem of the "tragedy of the commons," several authors argue that the community solution is the way out of this situation. Ostrom (1990), who received the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2009 for his contributions in the field, proposed the need for specific models of community management for commons and spoke about "organized cooperation." For his part, Zamagni (2014) says that the community solution is offers greater possibilities to overcome the tragedy

of the commons, highlighting the role of fraternity in this type of solution:

> Without the recognition of the value of the relationship, different from the usage value and the exchange value, we cannot get out of the tragedy of the commons. For common goods, the invisible hand of the market us not enough, nor is the visible hand of the State. In contrast, an economy of common goods that is anchored in the principle of fraternity is necessary (Zamagni, 2014, p. 35).

Sanchez Enriquez (2014) says that the tragedy of the commons is actually the tragedy of their users. Therefore, the solution is the creation of cooperation forms among them that are based on reciprocal relationships. In this regard, he states:

> The way to more effective cooperation would allow the effective use of the common good based on the interactive, permanent commitment that equitably benefits all users and, in turn, ensures the sustainability of the resource. This mode of use would be characterized by the idea of reciprocal relationships between the set of users (Sánchez Enríquez, 2014, p. 2).

Gutierrez and Mora (2011) similarly argue that: "The cry for common goods is a cry for a new community spirit, because it puts the interest of the common good ahead of the market" (p. 135).

The Governance of the Commons and Social Responsibility

From the stated above, and as various authors suggest it, common goods require specific governance mechanisms. The most important contribution in this regard was made by Ostrom (1990), who proposed that the governance of common goods has to be consistent with the nature of such goods. Therefore, it requires the direct involvement of the community that has the right to such goods. Or, as Zamagni (2014) says: "If this good is common, also must be its management" (p. 33). This has some important implications. This amounts to saying that the management of commons must be in the hands of stakeholders directly related to their production and access, or, at least, it must hear their voices and reflect on their interests.

Moreover, as Subirats (2011) states, the need for "structures or institutions that can manage common goods, reinforce the interdependencies, and deter those who want to take advantage of them in an opportunistic way" (p. 199). In particular, these institutions have to allow greater democratic control (Gutiérrez & Mora, 2011) for community members in order to minimize the emergence of the same problems that affect the public management model: The agency problem and rent seeking.

In the same vein, Sanchez Enriquez (2014) points out that the access to and use of common goods requires "compliance with contracts and explicit or implicit agreements" (p. 3) and, without these contracts and agreements, common goods "simply do not exist and become one of the other two mentioned types (private and public)" (p. 3).

Ostrom (1990) proposed a set of principles based on the design of governance systems suitable for common goods. Subirats (2011) and Landoni (2016) mention some of them: (1) clearly define who they include; (2) having a framework of operation that sets the rules for their production and access; (3) establish collective decision-making methods that incorporate the voices of all those involved; (4) having monitoring and management mechanisms in which they participate; (5) the existence of sanctions for those who breach the rules (in particular, free riders); (6) having mechanisms that favor a good conflict resolutions; (7) the recognition and legitimacy granted by third parties to this form of organization; and (8) create nested entities that organize the participation of the multiple stakeholders.

That said, given that almost the totality of the common goods are currently managed by the State or by private companies, it seems unreasonable to propose their replacement by community institutions or third-sector organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, or other types of civil associations. On the other hand, this type of institutions is not immune to the problems faced by the private sector and the State. To operate, they have to create bureaucratic structures that are equally vulnerable to the agency problem, rent seeking, and the actions of free riders.

This is the reason why the solution of the problem is not changing the property type of the organizations that manage the commons, but on changing the way they are managed. In other words, a paradigm shift that goes from focusing the topic on the property to doing so on the governance is required. To phrase it another way, it means understanding that the solution is not about who owns and manages (State, private, or third-sector organization) but about the way those activities are performed (governance).

In that sense, the consolidated concept of Organizational Social Responsibility (OSR), as it was formulated in the ISO 26000 (UNIT, 2011), provides a governance model for all types of organizations, which is especially valid for those managing common goods. This guide defines OSR as "the responsibility of an organization facing the impact of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behavior (UNIT, 2011, p. 18). Moreover, it proposes that this responsibility entails taking into account the expectations of all the stakeholders, contributing to sustainable development, and being integrated into the entire organization. The ISO 26000 Guide establishes that OSR requires modifications in existing forms of governance of organizations and provides a conceptual framework and practical guidance for their design and implementation. This framework includes a set of principles, amongst which the incorporation of ethics, transparency, and accountability and the requirement to incorporate the interests of stakeholders including future generations (UNIT 2011) are the most important, all of which goes in line with the governance principles of common goods proposed by Ostrom.

In short, it means that OSR is an alternative solution to the difficulty inherent to the different types of existing organizations to ensure the proper management of common goods. Or, as suggested by Zamagni (2005), by assuming that there are "civil and fair institutions" geared towards the common good in today's society: "This is the reason why that company that contributes to defining a civic ethic that knows how to build organizational condensation forms from which fair civil institutions may emerge is socially responsible" (p. 34).

Higher Education as a Common Good

Why should we propose Higher Education as a common good, if this is currently a good managed by the State (public good) or by different institutions of private nature (private good)? Talking about a common good also involves discussing the purposes of Higher Education and its teleologic aspects. Higher Education focused on the well-being or on the well having?

Firstly, there is an ontological argument, since Higher Education complies with the identity characteristics of common goods described in this document and, therefore, is a common good: (a) access to professional training and scientific knowledge must be universal in our modern societies; (b) as noted in the first section, the way some members of the community behave affects the access of others (this is the case for the costs and barriers to access to certain publications or the collection of tuitions as a result of keeping inefficiencies, incapacity, or negligence); (c) although it is managed by public or private institutions, Higher Education needs to incorporate the voices of all the involved actors (students, employers, funders, users of the knowledge produced, State, graduates, etc.) to meet its objectives, which means it is not owned by any of these institutions, but by the community in which they operate; (d) they are relational goods because education and research are essentially social actions that involve cooperation and reciprocity between the actors involved; (e) they are transgenerational, since they also strongly involve future generations (the trained professionals and the produced knowledge have a significant impact in the future); and (f) clearly, its production, distribution, and consumption should consider the general interest (for example, society well-being that can generate scientific knowledge and good professionals) and the common good (in as much as it involves the training of professionals oriented to it).

This ontological argument is supported by the fact that the theory (or theories) of the commons has included knowledge and education in its decalogue of common goods for a long time (Gutiérrez & Mora, 2011; Subirats, 2011). Both of these fall within what Marlowe et al. (2008) call "social common fields." We also mentioned that the International Forum on Globalization puts knowledge among the commons denominated "collective creations of our species" and education among the "social commons." In this way, the strong theoretical development on

this concept surely provides a theoretical framework to find a solution to the Higher Education problems that are unique to the commons, as is the case with ensuring its universal access and sustainability.

For example, the collective work entitled "The Commons of Knowledge," whose publication in 2007 was coordinated by Hess and Ostrom, provides the basis of a conceptual framework to analyze the current problems of production, distribution, and access to the information and knowledge. Hess and Ostrom indicate that there is an increasing number of academic researchers who find in the concept of common goods an appropriate theoretical framework to analyze the new dilemmas associated with the distribution of digital information, "which was being enclosed, commercialized, and over-patented" (Hess & Ostrom, 2016, p. 28). This framework speaks of "digital, electronic, information, virtual, communication, intellectual, technological, etc." commons to deal with the current problem of "distributed global information" (Hess & Ostrom, 2016, p. 28).

But there are also arguments of factual nature. UNESCO's main argument intends to stop the increasing privatization processes affecting Higher Education. But there is a stronger argument: The theory of the commons provides a new conceptual framework to analyze the major problems that Higher Education currently has and to find solutions for them. Behind UNESCO's proposal there is the double conviction that, on the one hand, the conceptualization of Higher Education as a public good does not find the solution to the increasing privatization problem and that, on the other hand, considering it as a good common good can be useful to find this solution. UNESCO is conscious of the need to change the paradigm (which considers Higher Education as a public good), since otherwise the only alternative to privatization would be returning to public management, either directly (public universities) or by new forms of outsourcing, which make it a good of public property and private management.

Higher Education as a Common Good and the Solution to its Current Problems

A brief review of the Higher Education problems described in the first section clearly shows that if education and knowledge production were effectively managed as commons, these problems would not exist or would have much less relevance.

This is because: (a) the payment of tuitions and the various forms of enclosure of the produced knowledge (copyrights, collection of academic paper fees, patents, etc.) are an attack against universal access; (b) the dishonest practices of students and academics affect the work quality of their colleagues; (c) the conviction of university graduates that acquired knowledge is owned, for their own benefit, and not for that of the society, as well as the appropriation of scientific knowledge by corporate groups that finance it or by publishers that disseminate it, distort the sense of community property that education and the production of

knowledge have; (d) the teaching methods inspired by the Business University and the lack of incentives for the creation of genuine cooperation networks among academics (mostly concerned about the compliance with the requirements arising from the need of universities to be included in the rankings) destroy human relationality inherent to the commons; (e) the lack of relevance of the professional programs offering, the abandonment of humanistic education components, the growing gap between research and knowledge application, and the research homogenization are an attack against its intergenerational sustainability; and, finally, (f) all of the above, far from contributing to the general interest and the common good, inclines in the opposite direction.

Generally speaking, authors and institutions that insist on making Higher Education a public good do it as a way to stop the processes that lead to the private appropriation of knowledge (García Menéndez, 2009; Pusser, 2005), based on the correct assumption that such appropriation is the main cause of many of these problems. However, these authors do not realize that the management of Higher Education under the governance models of public goods cannot prevent them for the same reasons that this generally happens for the commons due to, among other factors, the agency problem and rent seeking, characteristic of the State government. Strategies adopted by researchers to adapt to the requirements of the system manifest the agency problem, both the clearly immoral and those that are not. Nevertheless, so are the decisions of managers who, in a context of budgetary restrictions, rather than generate efficiencies (which in some cases requires giving up established privileges), choose to reduce the provision of professional training courses and adopt research agendas imposed by agents who fund it. A manifestation of rent seeking is the imposition of costs by external actors, as it is with publishing companies who manage the most recognized rates.

With that said, if all these problems receive serious attention, it is found that being a manifestation of the tragedy of the commons is a shared factor: The selfish and abusive use of some users adversely affects the use of others. Based on what we analyzed in the second section, the general solution to this tragedy is not changing the nature of the actor who manages the common good, but it consists in establishing specific mechanisms for its governance, different from the traditional ones of the private and public sector, such as those based on the principles proposed by Ostrom.

Although these principles are applicable to universities, it is necessary to read and adapt them to the specific reality of the commons managed by these institutions. This process has different degrees of difficulty according to the principle. In some cases, the difficulty appears to be lower (for example, the principle that establishes the enforceability of clearly determining who the common good includes), but, in others, the difficulty can reach superlative dimensions, since the interests involved are surely relevant to the actors involved (for example, it is very difficult to get consensus to determine sanctions for those who act wrongly).

Moreover, the implementation of most of these principles requires an institutional redesign which, in addition to affecting individual interests, gives raise to operational difficulties and profound cultural changes in these institutions. This issue of principle proposes having collective decision-making methods that incorporate the voice of all the stakeholders involved, since there are practical difficulties to incorporate some of them in decision making. For example, employers, companies using scientific knowledge produced by universities, community organizations, or students' parents. But in addition, cultural resistance to change and to the loss of powerful positions will surely be very high, even in university governance models in which co-management mechanisms of academics, students, and alumni exist, as it is the case of some public universities after the reform of Córdoba in the 1950s. Indeed, there is a "privatization" process in these universities, which takes place not in the sense of capitalist appropriation, but in the sense that those actors tend to manage them for the benefit of their own corporate interests, which is also a form of appropriating this common good.

The Role of University Social Responsibility

Given that the absolute majority of universities are currently managed by private or public institutions, it is utopian and irresponsible to suggest that the communities that they provide knowledge and education with manage them, as suggested by the theory of the commons. However, it is assumed that both types of universities could incorporate elements specific to the governance of the commons (in particular, the principles proposed by Ostrom) in their governance models. Just as for the set of common goods, the solution would go through incorporating in their governance the theoretical and methodological orientations of University Social Responsibility (USR), the specific manifestation of OSR that, as stated by Vallaeys (2014), is not "a mere application of the corporate social responsibility process to the university, since university impacts are genuine and are taken care of from the genuine academic competencies of the university" (p. 108). In the same vein, the main document of the AUSJAL (2009) states regarding USR: "This is not about mechanically incorporating in universities the Social Responsibility concept developed within the business sphere (...) but about reinventing this concept from the specificity of university work"(p. 11).

In addition to companies, universities are the only type of organizations that have developed a theoretical framework and methodologies for the practical implementation of their social responsibility. In Ibero-America, we can observe "two ways of understanding the concept and its application" (Martí-Noguera & Martí-Vilar, 2013, p. 148). The first, created in Latin America, puts strong focus on working with the community and the importance of training citizens aware of the socio-economic reality of their countries. In contrast, the second, promoted in Spain, focuses on aspects related to management models, "whose implementation

is in line with the business models of organizational reporting to society" (Martí-Noguera & Martí-Vilar, 2013, p. 148).

In Latin America, the conceptual development of USR began during the first five years of the 21st century with the collective work of a network of Chilean universities called Universidad Construye País and the contribution of the University Network of Ethics and Social Development (RUEDS) program, led by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The latter was based on a series of documents developed by Vallaeys and Carrizo (2006), who, before the publication of the ISO 26000, proposed a concept of USR based on the idea of the responsible management of university activity impacts, emphasizing the impacts of their three main functions (education, research, and extension), as well as the organizational impacts common to all types of organizations (Vallaeys, n.d.; Vallaeys, 2014).

Subsequently, interesting progress was recorded in countries like Colombia and Peru. Nonetheless, the conceptual and methodological framework with the greatest complexity might be the one developed by AUSJAL (Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America), considered by Martí-Noguera y Martí-Vilar (2013) "an evolution gathering the works developed by the UCP project and the IDB" (p. 152). The document "Policies and Self-Assessment and Management System of University Social Responsibility in AUSJAL" states that the three basic functions of the university "must be encouraged by the pursuit of the promotion of justice, solidarity, and social equity, by building successful responses to meet the challenges that promoting sustainable human development implies" (AUSJAL, 2009).

The intellectual movement behind the creation of the USR concept raises a questioning and reconsideration of the university role, demanding these institutions to assume a greater ethical commitment with the particular reality of each society (Licandro, Fernandez & Marturet, 2013). For example, in the definition of USR proposed in the Universidad Construye País project, the idea of associating this concept with "the ability that the university has to disseminate and implement a set of principles and general and specific values" is emphasized (Zurita, 2003, p. 65). Or, as stated by Vallaeys, USR

requires, from a holistic perspective, articulation of the various parts of the institution in a project of social promotion of ethical principles and social, equitable, and sustainable development, for the production and transmission of responsible knowledge, and the training of equally responsible professional citizens. (Vallaeys, .n.d., p. 4).

The core of the USR concept predominant in Latin America, based on the initial proposals of UCP and the RUEDS, is clearly in line with a conceptualization of Higher Education as a common good, whose production, distribution, and use must be geared towards the common good. In particular, it provides guidance to manage the education and knowledge production functions as commons. By way of example, it is worth mentioning some of the policies proposed by AUSJAL for these two functions.

In the case of the educational role, the document suggests, among other things, adapting the curriculum to bring it closer to the "reality of the country and the region," offering students "real-life experiences for an approach to social reality and to serve," developing "leadership based on participatory democracy" and "clear awareness of the ethical implications of their personal and professional actions" (AUSJAL, 2009, p. 22). "Facilitating access and permanence in the university for people with economic difficulties" is also included as a policy (AUSJAL, 2009, p. 24), even proposing this for other vulnerable populations, such as people with disabilities. For the research function, the document suggests "defining a thematic research agenda that emphasizes the Latin American reality" (AUSJAL, 2009, p. 23), generating interdisciplinary spaces, developing networks, and "disseminating academic production to make it accessible and understandable to the community, relevant social actors, and policy-makers" (AUSJAL, 2009, p. 23). Based on this idea, it can be inferred that AUSJAL universities, at least in their speech, intend to address the aforementioned problems that Higher Education suffers in the training and research fields.

Finally, it is important to highlight an emerging situation that is dangerous for the consolidation of USR and, as a result, will surely constrain its ability to contribute to the development of governance models for Higher Education that show consistency in its common good nature. As evidenced in the work of Martí, Calderón, and Fernández (2018), in some countries in Ibero-America (the authors study the cases of Peru, Brazil, and Spain), legislation on USR is being introduced, which undermines a central component of the OSR concept in the way it was put forward in the ISO 26000 (UNIT, 2011): its voluntariness. Indeed, by legislating on USR, "the establishment of a model or system that allows homogeneity in its implementation, methodology, and reports is required, so that the State can verify the actions undertaken by HEI in compliance with the law" (Martí et al., 2018, p. 109).

This situation, despite apparently being a progress in the application of USR, it is a paradox, since Social Responsibility does not refer to the compliance with laws or contracts, but to the voluntary behaviors adopted by organizations to reduce the negative impacts of their operation or to generate positive impacts on their stakeholders (Licandro, 2016). Everything included in the legislation on USR is automatically no longer considered USR and becomes a part of the set of rules imposed by society to the university. This advance of the legislation involves two big risks. On the one hand, there is a risk of emptying the USR content, and, on the other hand, it may involve a retrograde step towards a conceptualization of Higher Education as a public good.

Therefore, this concept requires as a necessary condition that, rather than legislating on the issue, States focus on creating stimuli and generating conditions that favor the voluntary incorporation of USR (for example, promoting degree accreditation mechanisms that include USR standards or directing funds based on the level of compliance to this type of standards),

as it has already been argued for the corporate sector (Licandro, 2016). It is important to note that we do not imply here that States must not legislate on Higher Education; they must not do so on USR.

FINAL COMMENTS

As with other United Nations (UN) calls on various subjects like peace, development, or children, the one made by UNESCO in 2015 to change the paradigm of the nature of Higher Education, from conceptualizing it as a public good to do so as a common good, risks being only a good intention and paying lip service. Hence the need to start reflecting on the theoretical and practical implications of re-conceptualizing Higher Education, in order to design strategies to fulfill that call.

This article argues that the proposal of UNESCO is correct from an ontological perspective because Higher Education and its products (training and knowledge) respond to the definition of commons and that, in addition, its application would find answers to the big problems that Higher Education is currently facing. It also notes that the incorporation of governance mechanisms typical for this type of goods in universities is a realistic path to follow facing the impossibility to convert public and private universities into institutions governed directly by the communities involved, as required by the nature of the commons. Finally, it is suggested that the theory of University Social Responsibility provides a conceptual and practical framework to manage universities as common goods geared towards the public interest and the common good.

The task is huge and requires facing multiple challenges, the main ones being: (a) convincing leaders of all sectors involved, particularly political leaders (in charge of directing and channeling the demands of citizens), about the need to change the course; (b) raising awareness and commitment in all the stakeholders more or less directly involved in the production, distribution, and use Higher Education products (managers, academics, students, funding agents, etc.) processes; (c) identifying and replacing all current stimuli that lead those actors to act as if the knowledge production and training were goods that can be privatized and owned, although it generates the exclusion of other users; (d) intelligently and firmly addressing the obstacles putting the actors that benefit from the current status quo; and (e) establishing an agenda for discussion that will lead to concrete proposals for the design of governance mechanisms consistent with the idea of Higher Education as a common good and applicable to both public and private institutions.

Finally, it is necessary to insist on the idea that the University Social Responsibility concept, which already has an interesting theoretical and methodological development, is consistent with the idea of Higher Education as a common good; therefore, it is not necessary to start from scratch. We can begin by translating its principles and directions in terms of common goods.

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