Social commitment in organizations: a look at Universidad del Valle

Compromiso social en las organizaciones: una mirada a la Universidad del Valle

[1] Henry Alberto Mosquera Abadía[ID]
Head Professor, Faculty of Administration Sciences, Universidad del Valle, Cali, Colombia
e-mail: henry.mosquera@correounivalle.edu.co

[2] Venus Flor Marina Carvajal-Ordoñez[ID]
Professor, Research Leader, Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, Centro Regional Buenaventura, Colombia
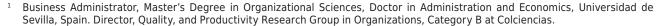e-mail: venus.carvajal@correounivalle.edu.co

Abstract

Since their inception, social commitment in universities has been present, thereby establishing a social contract between these institutions and society, which materializes through strategies and actions that meet the social environment's needs. This paper seeks to analyze that commitment through a case study applied to the Universidad del Valle, which employed a descriptive analysis that consisted of applying focused interviews that saw the participation by 80% of those responsible for the social projection. The content analysis method was applied for analysis, coupled with a documentary analysis of scientific texts and reports from the University's Outreach and Strategic Development Plans Divisions. The above showed that the University has strategies in place for building a fairer society and carries out high-impact actions on society, demonstrating its vocation to service and the fulfillment of its commitment to the development of the surrounding environment.

Keywords: Social commitment, Organizations, University, Social projection, Outreach.

Resumen

El compromiso social en las universidades ha estado presente desde sus inicios estableciendo un contrato social entre estas instituciones y la sociedad, este se materializa en estrategias y acciones que atienden las necesidades del entorno social. Este artículo tiene como propósito analizar dicho compromiso mediante un estudio de caso aplicado a la Universidad del Valle, se trata de un análisis descriptivo mediante la aplicación de entrevistas focalizadas en la que participaron el 80% de los responsables de la proyección social para su análisis se aplicó el método de análisis de contenido y se realizó un análisis documental a textos científicos, informes de gestión de las Oficinas de Extensión y Planes de Estratégicos Desarrollo de la Universidad. Con lo anterior se evidenció que la Universidad cuenta con estrategias para la construcción de una sociedad más justa y ejecuta acciones de alto impacto en la sociedad

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1 Business Administrator, Master's Degree in Organizational Sciences, Doctor in Administration and Economics, Universidad de Sevilla, Spain. Director, Quality, and Productivity Research Group in Organizations, Category B at Colciencias.

2 Business Administrator, Master's Degree in Organizational Sciences, Universidad del Valle, Colombia.

demostrando su vocación de servicio y el cumplimiento de su compromiso con el desarrollo de su entorno circundante.

Palabras clave: Compromiso social, Organizaciones, Universidad, Proyección social, Extensión.

1. Introduction

The transformation of management, organizations, and the organizational environment is increasingly demanding and creates new directors' challenges. Several of these changes have contributed to recognizing organizations' social commitment since their inception, and their interaction with society becomes increasingly essential throughout their operation. This fact is not alien to universities; on the contrary, social commitment is ever-more demanding due to their role as knowledge managers. Nowadays, aside from managing resources, organizations must be interested in and take care of their environment's social affairs. Hence, social commitment is not only the responsibility of some economic sectors but of all in general (García, 2017).

Social commitment gains relevance at the Universidad del Valle due to the need to account for its performance in the surrounding environment, to account for the university-society interaction. In accordance with the above, and in order to analyze and describe how that social commitment materializes in the Organization, research was carried out on the Universidad del Valle in the form of a case study, within the framework of the Research Project *"Interaction between University and Society Through the Outreach Function in the 2019-2020 period "* in order to shed light on the University's contributions to its environment.

2. Theoretical basis

The University was born during Aristotle'sand Plato's time in the form of the Academy and the Lyceum. Another milestone in the history and transformation of universities took place in medieval times with the predominance of the Catholic Church, a time during which it was recognized under the term "Universitas," which indicates totality and is split into

two categories: Universitas magistrorum - referring to groups of teachers (individuals who teach)- and Universitas scholarium, alluding to the association of students (individuals who learn), (Bravo, 2009); in both cases, they are regarded as organizations of social meaning (Martin, 2012; Clark, 1997; Borrero, 2008; Kruse, 2006; Himanka, 2015). Authors such as Pedersen, 1997; Borrero, 2008, and Tünnermann, 2001) identified the Catholic Church as the leading promoter of universities, with teaching, research, and social outreach or projection falling within its core functions; the latter being oriented to the tending of demands from the social environment. Although early universities' focus was to meet the State and the Church's needs, these institutions' social commitment has been recognized as of their inception.

According to De Nez (2018), universities are organizations with a robust social sense displayed in the preparation of programs, projects, strategies, and alliances with the State and the real sector for tending to all social needs, all of which is possible on account of the humanistic and social nature of the universities. Cuevas Jiménez (2016) and Borrero (2008) established a close and direct interaction between universities and their social environment based on a relationship of mutualism, where the former receive resources for their functioning and the latter benefits from the knowledge transfer processes. In addressing universities' social commitment, it is necessary to introduce the structure of their mission, which mainly revolves around teaching functions, which materialize through actions such as access to, building, transfer, appropriation, and use of knowledge. In that process, universities are responsible for leading the thought revolution, essential to the other social transformations (CRESALC, 2008, p. 7).

Tünnermann (2008) proposes knowledge as a social transformation factor because of its contributions to sustainable development; as universities are par-excellence builders and managers of knowledge, their prompt tending to these needs becomes imperative, compelling them to make more significant efforts to fulfill their social commitment. On the other hand, university education is thought of as a human right; therefore, it is held as a public good and a fundamental

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tool for constructing sustainable human development societies (Figueroa, Gilio, and Gutierrez, 2008). University research is closely linked to the innovative alternatives that respond mainly to the needs of the real sector and the State, which does not mean that applied and formative research within universities has lost its social meaning; Oviedo (2010) and Clark (1997) ascertain that this should be regarded as the primary function, addressing both the needs of the State and society as a whole (Lajeunesse, 1994).

On the other hand, the outreach function, also known as the third function or social projection, is characterized by closely impacting the strengthening of the university-society relationship. It is highly regarded in social transformation processes and communities' economic development, as it contributes to social welfare, and ultimately to the fulfillment of universities' social commitment (Mariátegui, 2017; De Marco and Fanfa, 2018; González, 2018). In the same vein, Tünnermann (2000) indicates that universities' transformation processes allowed them to become organizations of a strengthened social sense that question societal problems and are continually working on actions that contribute to improving society's living conditions.

Universities' social commitment is addressed on the basis of its three core functions: teaching, research, and outreach. However, universities' functions are not limited to these three because their raison d'être is social in itself, which is why UNESCO has recognized their importance in the development of regions, for these organizations largely contribute to the five vital areas for human development outlined in the 2030 sustainable and inclusive development agenda (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016).

Baque (2020) affirms that universities must collaborate with external institutions in the priority tending of those living in poverty, thus attesting to their social commitment by applying knowledge to develop proposals that address social needs and community problems (GICBA, 2016). The contributions that universities make to different social

development processes conflate in two concepts: commitment and University social responsibility (USR). Social commitment is understood as the raison d'être of these organizations, a duty to society, while URS encompasses the policies and actions carried out to fulfill that duty. For our case study, the social commitment was used to account for the relationship between the Universidad del Valle and its surrounding environment (Bolio and Pinzón, 2019).

In addressing the issue of USR, it is necessary to establish that universities are open organizations (Tünnermann, 2001) in continuous interaction with their environment, which have established a reciprocal relationship with society, displaying a strong social commitment, and changes in the foundational paradigms and the monitoring of universities' impact on society (Gaete, 2011). USR is usually analyzed from perspectives such as management and direction, which mainly focus on the impact of university work on interest groups; transformational by focusing on the contributions these institutions make to building a better society. Lastly, there is the normative perspective, which addresses the exchange of values and principles in the university-society relationship (Gaete, 2011, p. 98). Furthermore, the study of USR can also be addressed through measurements about perceptions, concept analysis, and case studies, as per Larran and López (2010). Hill (2004) and Mehta (2011) believe the importance of USR is displayed in its contributions to strengthening the social environment's relationship. Their positive impact on society characterizes URS-born contributions, and its actions usually aim at promoting environmental care, human rights, and work in vulnerable communities (Nejati, Shafael, Salamzadeh, and Daraei, 2011; Ojeda, 2013).

This research harnessed the concept of social commitment to analyze the Universidad del Valle under the understanding that that is the essence of universities' duty. To prove the fulfillment of the third function, these organizations engage in a series of actions ranging through their formal, normative, and bureaucratic establishment, adding this commitment to their strategic direction, which seeks to ensure that the institution's

internal levels make it their own and gear their efforts towards compliance therewith (Mariátegui, 2017). Among the ways of analyzing universities' social commitment, there is the studying of social projection or outreach activities (Cortes, 2012), the axis that directly harnesses knowledge for the tending of social needs in a continued, dynamic and reciprocal relationship with society. This is how responsible intervention becomes possible in communities, especially in those regarded at a higher degree of vulnerability due to their socio-economic and cultural conditions (Escobar, 2018; Erazo, 2013; Fresán, 2004)

According to Tünnermann (2008), Erazo (2013), and Martin (2012), universities' social commitment is evident since their inception. These organizations have forged a strong bond with their surrounding environment, regardless of their founders' interests, for universities' relationship with society has been implicit since their early days and is the raison d'être for their birth; throughout history and thanks to transformation processes, they have strengthened their ties to society. Hence, universities' commitment to their environment goes beyond the formation of individuals committed to society. (Marjorie and Guaranda, 2020; Múnera, 2011; Ley 30 de 1992).

Education is extensively held accountable for building societies because of its social function and connection with the past, future, and humanity's cultural transformations (Amar, 2000). Therefore, universities' social commitment to their community is grand (Baque, 2020), and so asserts Gaete (2011) in that their institutional strategy should attest to this purpose.

At this point, we may ascertain that universities' responsibility in management, training, cognition, and social participation, aims at sustainable development for society (Vallaeys, 2018, p. 35). That means universities are closely tied to society, and their contributions to social development (from their core functions of training, research, and extension) strengthen this relationship through interventions in the culture, using strategies, programs, and projects that focus on the community, actions for the protection and conservation of the environment, the

development of skills and competencies for conflict management, coexistence and reconciliation, and by implementing training processes in the most vulnerable sectors of society.

Considering the above, universities, like all organizations, are observed to have a social commitment since their functioning impacts society. Although there is a whole framework of reference for action, society should periodically review and analyze compliance with the aforementioned social commitment, which is why studies such as this are highly relevant and valuable for feedback and enabling improvements that strengthen the bond between universities and society.

3. Methodology

A descriptive-qualitative study was carried out to achieve our research objective, using documentary analysis, and applying focused interviews for information gathering methods. The process took place throughout these stages:

Stage 1: A documentary analysis of the available state-of-the-art scientific literature in databases like SCOPUS, Web of Science, and Google Scholar was carried out. A longitudinal and retrospective biometric study was carried out (Ferrer-Villalobos, Freire-Constant, Suasnavas-Bermudez, Merino-Salazar, and Gómez-García, 2017) for gathering, in order to build the reference framework supporting the research and lay the conceptual foundations of universities' social commitment.

Stage 2. Execution of a documentary analysis to the 2005-2015 and 2015-2025 strategic development plans and academic units reports from 2013 to 2018 to identify the University's development policies' approach to social commitment.

Stage 3. At this point, in-depth interviews were applied (Martínez, 1998; Díaz, Torruco, Martínez, and Varela, 2013) to the Universities' social outreach leaders, which saw participation at 80%. Hierarchically, participants consisted of the Department of Outreach and Continuing Education and its dependencies: continuing education, the

project management unit, entrepreneurs program, the graduates' program, and the professional internship program; regarding academic units, there was participation from the Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Administration, Faculty of Integrated Arts, and the Faculty of Health. This process was conducted to learn the University's high-impact social actions firsthand.

The information collected through the interviews was processed using the content analysis method, thus outlining the descriptive narrations in the metatext and enabling the extraction of modal sections and interpretation thereof (Moraima and Mújica, 2008). This process identified the most impactful actions regarded as successful compliance cases with the University's social commitment.

4. Results and Discussion

The results were grouped into three key research components: the Strategic Development Plans analysis that identified the strategies aimed at fulfilling the social commitment, which read as follows:

The University's social commitment is a strategic issue within the 2005-2015 strategic development plan, and it is called bonding with the environment. Its axis for action is Outreach and Social Projection, which aim to strengthen ties with society by boosting institutional responses to the needs of the region by proposing strategies (such as designing and implementing an institutional outreach system, expanding the continuing education portfolio and other educational services), and strengthening the University's role in the public and private production sectors (by pursuing more effective inter-institutional cooperation with social actors through broadened and strengthened public and private inter-institutional agreements), more robust follow-ups and linking of graduates, a more comprehensive offer of and opportunities for professional practicums, and strengthening the entrepreneurial program.

The strategic 2015-2025 development plan recognizes the importance of outreach activities in integrating with the community.

In order to strengthen that relationship, the plan sets the link to society as an Action axis and seeks to consolidate the social projection system, promoting participation in workspaces with the community and local government, strengthening the social fabric, and improving levels of trust in the public sector to strengthen the relationship with the social environment. The plan, to achieve this objective, contemplates strategies such as consolidating a lasting relationship with its graduates, strengthening participation in the socio-economic, cultural, political, and environmental development of the region and the country through social projection and outreach articulated with research and training, participating in peacebuilding processes and peaceful conflict resolution, reaffirming the regional nature of the University and extending its ties and commitments to the region's transformation and integral and sustainable development, and improving mechanisms for interacting with society so as to provide transparency in the activities carried out.

The consultation with the Director-General of Outreach at Universidad del Valle, the leaders of his departments, the academic units interviewed, and the analysis conducted on the Academic Units' reports made it possible to account for the most relevant interventions, as detailed below:

- Program for early childhood comprehensive development, which benefited 242 educational agents and impacted 6,000 children in Cali.

- Raising awareness in psychoactive substances consumption through prevention programs in 50 educational institutions, serving 3000 people.

- Improvement actions to enable access to and permanence in University at 42 municipalities in Valle del Cauca, impacting the population in stratum 0, 1, and 2.

- Governance program for peacebuilding processes, benefiting 70 social leaders.

- Formulated and evaluated public policies and programs focusing on ethnicity, gender, rural youth, and land tenure, benefiting 66 people in prioritized territories.

- Administration and management of SISBEN Cali databases, providing coverage for over 1,300,000 low-income inhabitants.

- Formulation of the University's environmental management plan for wetlands, which benefited 300 people.

- Strategies for protecting and conserving the environment, benefiting over 1000 environmental managers and 200,000 inhabitants in Cali's 21 communes.

- Implementation of the climate change mitigation plan that benefits 1500 citizens, 30 teachers in state-run institutions and 30 public officials, and the creation of two eco-neighborhoods.

- Strategic plan for rural and nature tourism for the municipality of Cali, covering its 15 districts.

- Development of artistic training processes that targeted the armed conflict victims, which strengthened this population's skills.

- Digital education for all to strengthen state-run institutions' faculty's competencies in the face of the challenges of the 21st century. This process benefited 3000 teachers and 800 university students.

- Entrepreneurship strategies in areas of inclusion and opportunities in Cali, through the training, counseling, and supporting businessmen and entrepreneurs, benefiting 200 microenterprises, and 50 entrepreneurs.

- Implementation of the PILOS talent program, where 217 students from the most vulnerable city sectors benefited from academic leveling programs to create more opportunities for higher education access.

- Strengthening the peace discourse by measuring and preparing educational program plans for the official institutions of 34 municipalities in Valle del Cauca, benefiting 104 educational institutions. These activities help develop soft skills in the population to foster attitudes and behaviors that contribute to peaceful conflict resolution, healthy coexistence, and promoting a culture of peace, thereby strengthening peace, justice, and solidarity processes and fostering decent jobs and economic growth.

- Comprehensive care project for gangs, serving over 1000 people who have received training and academic counseling to develop their occupational profiles, work skills, whereby some beneficiaries gained access to higher education and gang confrontation decreased.

The above attests to the University's close relationship with society, augmenting its social development impact at the local and national levels. As part of its social commitment, programs are developed that support income generation through entrepreneurship, serving potential entrepreneurs in need of assistance to lay down their proposals through innovation and creativity, allowing them to consolidate highly competitive and productive business proposals. The Entrepreneurs Program serves this population.

Although all people can develop the necessary skills for entrepreneurship, others prefer to venture into the labor world first, gain experience, apply the knowledge acquired in their training, and mature a little more as professionals. In this case, the University becomes a liaison agent for students and their first professional experience through the Business Practicum Program. These processes are very favorable for students considering that many get hired by the company they did their practicum at, aside from gaining professional work experience before leaving the University.

The Practicum Program impacts communities directly, as is the case for those carried out by students from the Academic Programs on Social and Economic Sciences. These knowledge areas conduct relevant social work in multiple areas in the region, bringing students closer to their profession's realities and communities in the most isolated places and the University.

Once their training process and practicum have finished, the University continues to support its graduates so that they can enter the labor market. This is a critical process for the institution, for most of its graduates

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pertain to vulnerable sectors, so they are monitored and counseled through the Employment Fund Initiative and the Labor Observatory.

The University's social commitment contemplates the qualifying of professionals and training for the population. The Continuing Education Area - deemed fundamental for university-society integration - is in charge of these processes through a comprehensive offer that serves different population groups, ranging from people with postgraduate training and professionals seeking updated knowledge on subjects specific to their professional exercise to entrepreneurs, internal and outside students, and vulnerable communities with less access to higher education due to their socio-economic conditions. It is in the latter group of people that the importance of continuing education stands out. Among the population served by the above programs, we found community and head-of-household mothers, children, and youths, and adolescents from remote communities, priority sectors, and at-risk adults. Vulnerable young people who had never set foot in higher education or a University have received training in technical and soft skills that contribute to transforming their lives.

Universities' social commitment also requires articulation between its core functions (Teaching, Research, Extension) to generate broader impacts on society, thus showing that social commitment is cross-sectional and involves all of the Universities' functions, the institution as a whole. Therefore, such a commitment is immersed across all institutional levels and the work of the research groups.

Likewise, the University's Research Centers work directly on the community's needs through activities that benefit the most vulnerable population in the short term and aid in developing the social environment as a whole in the long term by developing solid waste, wetlands, and Cali mobility analyses.

Our results account for a positive impact on the social transformation that creates opportunities and aids in constructing life projects and improving social, environmental, educational, and health conditions for the population, especially in the neediest sectors,

thereby favoring their welfare. Those processes benefit communities through programs, projects, and strategies. At the same time, the University's connecting students, teachers, and researchers with the reality of their environment grant the institution the feedback necessary for continuous improvement and the transformation of its core functions, to wit, teaching, research, and outreach.

Nowadays, the University's mission is to commit itself to the service of social needs and problems and to aid in the construction of a fairer and more equitable society. That is to say, what was known as the Cordoba Reformation, the third mission hand in hand with training and research in recent years, all within the neoliberal scheme of funding imposed by Lae 30 of 1992, whereby the State is accountable for just a share of public universities' budget. Nevertheless, despite Universidad del Valle's approaches to its surrounding environment, it is still far from playing a decisive role as this work has demonstrated. It still has a long way to go before becoming an agent of change that helps overcome inequality and social exclusion in the Department of Valle - and why not in the country's southwest because of its leadership in that region of Colombia - bringing on its own and society's transformation. To that end, the University needs to free itself from market dependence, enabling it to play a more decisive and active role in regional development and meeting social needs and demands.

It will also be necessary to rethink the activities, practices, and programs being implemented and gear them towards a University-society approach by conducting an inquiry that accounts for conceptualization thereof; reviews experiences thus far, and, if possible, generates practical proposals. That will oblige the institution to assess its experiences in order to set a more impactful course of action for the transformation of its graduates and the community in general, and it will be imperative in the next decade of the twenty-first century.

5. Conclusion

Universities are organizations highly capable of transforming and adapting to the

environment's requirements by establishing a synergistic relationship that benefits both parties. During the early days, their main objective was to form church and state leaders and were hermetic.

However, changes in the social environment drove the university model's transformation towards an open current committed to addressing specific societal issues, thus acknowledging a social commitment.

Society has acknowledged universities as knowledge-managing institutions, and knowledge, as a social asset, must be delivered back to society to meet its needs and contribute to constructing a more equitable society, leaving behind its hermetic and elitist nature. The University's social commitment and vocation of service are consolidated by responding to those demands, aiming to establish and/or strengthen the university-society relationship.

In compliance with its social commitment, the University performs outreach activities directed at interaction with society by disseminating the arts, transferring knowledge, promoting culture, developing proposals to address specific problems, and implementing socially and economically impacting projects, and providing continuing education, thereby recognizing its commitment to the community.

Generally speaking, we may conclude that outreach-implemented actions have successfully and materialized the University's social commitment. Therefore, we believe it is pertinent to point out that our research also found some issues the University needs to address, such as a larger budget, focusing on social outreach activities, infrastructure, and physical plant allocation.

6. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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