

## **Professional Ethics of University Professors A Weakness of Higher Education in Mexico**

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### **Summary**

*Public universities in Mexico have within their institutional discourse a formative orientation located in the field of ethics of professions. Their organic laws establish that the training of professionals is not to be limited only to the development of technical abilities, but also to contributing to the development of a morality in higher education which allows them to understand the working and social reality, with a tendency to influence, from the knowledge of each disciplinary field. Therefore, university training does not only regard the development of professional competences, but also to social values which prepare their graduates for the construction of a democratic society. This paper has taken Mexican professors from the Universidad Autonoma de Sinaloa (Autonomous University of Sinaloa) as the object of analysis, taking into consideration their duty with the formation of youngsters before a society with non-ethical manifestations which affect the harmony and the community civilian nature.*

**Keywords:** professional ethics, teaching culture, university education

### **1. Introduction**

The professionals being formed in the universities have as their final destination not only labor contexts, but also social contexts where their professional and personal life will be registered. The national reality in Mexico is presenting anomic features which is transforming some regions into highly conflictive, disputing with the conventional standards of a peaceful, civilized society which favors harmonic relationships among the population. Reducing the purposes of higher education to the development of competences for specialized work, is assuming that technocratic rationality will take over educational projects that, in their foundations, were created for the formation of men and women with qualities to live the principles of modernity. This is not at all attempting to diminish the importance of technical-professional culture, doing so would deny one of the fundamental components which society and labor market have in permanent observation; instead, it is expected that professors take on the duty of teaching and developing it into the culture of university students. This here is not the questionable issue, it is about approaching the faculty's convictions and attitudes in order to identify the critical features about their teaching, particularly regarding their contribution from their educational action to the formation of youngsters with enough ethicicity to behave with social values facing a world in crisis.

The recent report on peace in Mexico is alarming (IEP, 2015). Taking into consideration the 76 biggest metropolitan areas in this country we will find evidence which introduce us to the problem being discussed. In a scale from 1 to 10, where one indicates the most peaceful and 10 the least safe, we find that the city of Orizaba, Veracruz is the most civilized and safest in its everyday life; while the city of Culiacan, Sinaloa is ranked as the most violent featuring the rupture of elemental rules of good coexistence. Before the end of the 20th century, UNESCO published an orientation to all higher education institutions in the world, with the tendency to achieve a better contribution in the formation of youngsters in the 21st century. It pointed out that these houses of study should put into practice intellectual capacity and moral prestige to spread and educate in values such as peace, justice and freedom, among other ethical qualities (UNESCO 1998).

The diagnose brought up by the Instituto para la Economía y la Paz (the Institute for Economy and Peace) about civility in Mexico, indicates that universities in this country are far from the propositions made on this matter for university formation by international organizations. The philosophical and normative discourse within the organic law of some universities, states that the purposes of Mexican public higher education are not limited to the development of technical-professional competencies, but also that university degrees should be held by men and women who are sensitive to the economical and social needs of their regions, as embodied in the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Autonomous National University of Mexico) legislation (UNAM, 1945), Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS, 2006), and all the universities subsidized by public fundings, which constitute a reference within this study. This formative premise compromises the faculty's teaching with students in the university. It transcends the technical and cognitive purposes to incorporate the ethical dimension of university formation. It is about institutions of higher education granting high importance to the development of the professional *ethos*, understanding this, as the humanistic character and a vocation for justice and democratic civility which must be comprised in the cultural profile of youngsters graduating from classrooms. This becomes relevant in an unequal and violent society like several labor and social environments of the Mexican reality (IEP, 2015). The reflection about teaching traditions goes back decades, as Liston and Zeichner (1997) and also Gimeno and Pérez-Gómez (2000) make a recount of ways of practicing teaching, highlighting the intellectual, social and ethical repercussions of their professional activity during the educational journey.

Educational research in this field accounts for some critical features within higher education. The obtained findings in the project about professional ethics begun in 2006 at the post-graduate level of 15 universities are known, and were taken as theoretical and methodological basis to widen the view among teachers and students from bachelor's degree programs and, even, from institutions of elementary education (Hirsch, 2011). The identified problems in these investigations present different levels of separation regarding institution educational duties and subjects, particularly when observing conflictive and anomic scenarios where university graduates perform, from what can be understood is that in all of these universities there are signs of ethical-professional weakness in the processes of formation. An open window of the research in this field of study is the one constituted by projects oriented to comprehending the place of social responsibility in university formation as a constitutive element of professional ethics, where Marti, Gaete, Puerta and Martí-Villar (2014: 19-37) have created a conceptual via to approach what is carried out today in higher education, without losing sight of the ethical contribution which is done, or should be done from the university to society. It is about conceiving students not only as economical subjects where technical rationality predominates, but also, to vindicate the cultural and formative role that these institutions have assigned in the configuration of the professional *ethos*, whose moral properties predispose the constructing of equity, solidarity and justice relations in the diverse contexts of their everyday life (Yurén, 2008).

Some research projects such as the one Guadalupe Chávez (2014: 215-231) carried out in the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon), in one of the three largest institutions in Mexico, reflects the imaginary and auto perception of students regarding their role as a social subject, at least one third of the people being formed as professionals live the uncertainty of acknowledgement by society which guides their behavior and disposition to serve. This is manifested, according to Chávez, in spite of the General University Formation program from UANL, which has a purpose to contribute to the development of the professional *ethos*, whose results make us look towards institutional intervention and the action of the faculty to identify causes and factors which allow to understand the ethical and cultural profile of those who are graduating from higher education. Some critical signs have been identified among the university faculty in the Autonomous University of Sinaloa, taking into consideration the academic duties in student's ethical formation, whose orientating principles of the teaching practice are embodied within the institutional and philosophical regulation (UAS, 2014). This becomes relevant, especially if we consider that UAS is the most important institution of higher education in the state of Sinaloa and the one with the largest matriculation in the northwest of Mexico. Likewise, we could enumerate a list of problem issues observed in the studies carried out in the last years, such as the following: weak features of moral professionalism among the youngsters in the formative process, intolerance and marginalization affecting female teachers who as women are wrapped in nets woven by institutional power (Izaguirre, 2010:133-177), the ethical-professional fragility in the faculty's teaching culture, as well as the scarce social commitment of teachers during teaching according to students' opinion (Solis, 2013).

These ethically questionable facts interfere with good practice; the important thing is that it should not be seen as an image issue, but as representative obstacles to good teaching which inevitably is contaminated, given that the institutional contexts and formative spaces are common to all university actors. The field of professional ethics in higher education institutions has been constituted into a necessary and growing space, taking into consideration that students' labor and social destiny being formed in the university is dominated by scarce moral development, according to Kohlberg's concept (1992), which highlights the importance of ethical formation of students, as future actors of institutions in an insane society which we, the adults are leaving as heritage.

## 2. Research Methodology Criteria

The contexts with clear social decomposition features which are expressed in corruption, violence and discredited public institutions, constitute a national problem; however, here, the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS) has been taken as a referent of the analysis for three reasons: first, UAS is one of the macro-universities in the country with more than 130 thousand students and 7 thousand teachers approximately; second, its largest matriculation is in Culiacan, Sinaloa, its population is perceived as the unsafest and non-civilized according to a research study carried out in 76 metropolitan areas of Mexico; and third, what is here presented is the result of an investigation about professional ethics in university formation, a national project started in 2006 among 15 Mexican universities. A cut was done in the recent results to be analyzed in this work, from which the identified findings were taken in the Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Administrativas (College for Social and Administrative Science) which includes the faculties of Law, Economics, International Studies, Administration and Psychology, having as venue the central university campus of Culiacan, capital city of the state of Sinaloa. The purpose of identifying convictions and attitudes of students about their profession, particularly those related to their ethical culture was explored through a 36 items Likert questionnaire, from which was taken only what is related to peaceful coexisting. This is about knowing how committed youngsters being formed in the university are, with principles and values which can direct their professional and social practice. The problem deduced from exploring students' culture, led to questioning teachers particularly after observing their students' weak ethical formation. What is the university faculty doing or not doing facing this fragile configuration of the *ethos* among the students, mainly when the social environment displays signs of anomy and non-solidarity?

## 3. Students' Cultural Features and Professional Ethics

The convictions and attitudes of every human being can be valued from our conceptual lens; this is the purpose; to come closer to students' culture in order to understand their ethical formation and, as a necessary relation, to know how teachers are understanding and giving meaning to the result of their teaching practice. Therefore, the answers to the items for the questionnaire related to peaceful coexisting are organized in three groups of ethical features according to their opinions which are the following: 1) orienting professional actions towards good coexisting; 2) lean on their profession to help the poorest population; and 3) provide professional help to achieve a peaceful society. As it can be seen (chart # 1), the ethical features are located on the left column and to the right, students' expressions can be observed.

**Chart # 1: Ethical Features in University Students' Culture**

| FEATURES IN STUDENTS' ETHICAL FORMATION                    | IDENTITY FEATURES | UNCERTAINTY FEATURES | DISCREPANCY FEATURES |
|--|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Orienting professional actions towards good coexisting     | 46%               | 34%                  | 20%                  |
| Leaning on their profession to help the poorest population | 47%               | 32%                  | 21%                  |
| Providing professional help to achieve a peaceful society  | 51%               | 30%                  | 19%                  |

The general observation from the students' expressions is a clear sign of the problem. Practically only half answered having identity with the ethical principles identified with the value of peaceful coexisting and, on the other hand, the other half tends to differ or, at least, to have an ambiguous attitude toward circumstances in need of taking action to contribute to achieve a harmonious, solid air community with a vocation for peace.

From professional performance a contribution can be made to these ethical purposes; however, barely 46% showed a disposition to act in such direction, while the one third expressesun decisive opinions along with one fourth whom categorically distances from the attitudes of good coexistence. Insensitivity towards the poorest segments of population is very high, if taken into consideration that less than half (47%) says to have a disposition to help by using their profession, keeping a notoriously disturbing tendency of those who reject giving their time and effort to give something back to society in marginalization conditions. The ethically worrying findings are confirmed, especially if we notice that barely 51% are willing to contribute with their professional knowledge to the construction of a peaceful society, where practically half is in indifference and rejection to such purpose. The charity principle which guides us to perform good deeds, as stated by Hortal (2010), legitimizes every profession and gives dignity to the human being who practices it; however, as it might be noticed, the students' ethical culture is at risk of staying in a nebular zone. The ethical principles within the purposes of the university institution are proving to be marginal in the formation processes; this is shown in the exploration carried out among young people studying a professional career at UAS. The problem is not minor, thus we would have to ponder: Where is the faculty before such a critical scenario that questions their professional ethics?

#### ***4. Teaching Culture and Responsibility of the University Faculty***

Teachers have institutional, academic and ethical duties as relevant actors in the processes of student formation. At UAS, the institution where this research was carried out and results are presented, the ruling principles of teaching are established and, more specifically, teachers' professional duties to achieve ethical formation in every field of knowledge (UAS, 2006, 2014). Teachers are not hired to "teach a class", frequently mentioned, as they have a greater commitment which is inscribed in a tradition of public universities; to develop knowledge and competencies in every professional field, as well as to contribute in the formation of just women and men with democratic callings. University purposes in every career at UAS states so (UAS, 2011). What was observed in students' culture indicates that the academic personnel are not doing their job. Their teaching practice is below minimal ethicity, given that the scarce development of ethical qualities among their students is a sample of non-compliance of their duties as a labor and moral subject. A strong critical sign emerges among the attitudes being observed in students. Their cultural features as subjects being formed indicate that the teaching practice has not fulfilled its purpose, if the university curriculum purposes are taken as reference to carry out an assessment. Teachers' job in the classroom is organized and performed from their competencies and professional values, thus imperative to stop and take a close look at their teaching culture. It is not useful to have a deterministic interpretation of the educational act, as in every educational relation multiple elements are conjugated, in which the teachers' cultural profile has a preponderant place, therefore, it can be concluded, as professionals in teaching, there is a duty to engender socio-cognitive environments and relations to achieve relevant learning. This is a part of teachers' ethical compromise.

Taking into account the ethical-professional weaknesses expressed by the students, I organized my exploration among teachers looking for those who expressed their opinions about students' attitudes, asking that their answers be associated to the teaching duties which are not being fulfilled by them. It was important that they stated what they do in order to have a good performance, to state their aspirations and limitations in their pedagogical culture. For the analysis, a typology of university teachers, according to their ethical-professional features were taken into account, as well as values and beliefs to which they identify with in order to carry out their formative task with their students. The typology of the faculty is: 1) scientific academicism, 2) educational economicism, and 3) innovative academic professionalism. In each of these types, values and beliefs are noted in the expressions of the interviewed teachers. (See chart 2)

**CHART 2: Professional Ethics and its Features in Teaching Culture**

| Types of Teachers According to Ethical-Professional Assessment | Faculty's Values and Beliefs about Their Formative Task in the University   |
|--|---|
| Scientific academicism   | Teaching as a technique:<br>Mastering of scientific knowledge, the program as a guide, academic autonomy, socially closed university.   |
| Educational economicism  | Teaching as an economical resource:<br>Working stability as a priority, salary about intellectual freedom, heteronomous planning, and bureaucratic dependence.  |
| Innovative academic professionalism                            | Teaching for integral formation:<br>Science and social problematic as a formative nucleus, professional competencies, teaching autonomy, academic thoroughness, ethical formation, social values, professionals as people, university open to their time. |

The analysis is carried out taking into account the assessment teachers have of themselves and the work of their peers, contrasting their opinions with the purposes the university has in the face of the students' formative necessities, which is the main task of the university faculty. There are three conceptions of teaching in higher education which make possible to understand the attitudes and aspirations of teachers, without losing sight that these are produced facing their daily duties in the classroom. All this, taking into consideration the features of their ethical configuration observed in the professional culture which through teaching practice have transmitted and developed in students. The analytic strategy to understand the culture of teachers has as an important referent the professional features which were manifested by students, considering that these were instilled through teaching action, thus the categorization of its typology is closely associated to the results of their practice in the classroom with their students, as well as their convictions and dispositions identified in their answers when they were interviewed.

#### 4.1.-Scientific Academicism

A segment of the faculty has idealized their professional work basing it on transmitting science in any of the conditions they do their job in. "getting students to master science above all", they are not interested in investing more time than established in their contracts, "preparing a class session takes hours updating the information of the academic discipline". This type of teachers are proud about their field, they demand themselves and their colleagues, because they consider that "higher teaching is no place for improvised (teachers)". As noticed in their opinions, humoring the incompetents is not part of their code, nor to tolerate that institutional do regulations allow the academic personnel to be invaded by teachers who "do not have scientific and updated knowledge as a priority". The technical mastering of the content knowledge is not negotiable, so they do not give credit to pedagogical suggestions which imply the exploration of comprehensive paths and demand deliberative spaces, as they consider they have arrived to the university classrooms to teach scientific knowledge. In their purpose of educating future professionals they vindicate that "autonomy as academics must not be transgressed, not even by the hiring authority", it is a space earned by the experts who, according to judgment, requires remaining inviolable.

The conviction of scientific academicism is characterized by excluding the formation of the professional *Ethos* among students from its teaching purposes. The function they consider must be fulfilled is not that of forming citizens but competent professionals, because "this is what society expects from the university", emphatically answering so to a direct question. There is no margin for doubt: university teachers, who conceive their job in the classroom this way, without being the majority, have achieved acknowledgement in the imaginary of all those who see higher education from a techno-scientific conception, with all the non ethical consequences this has. This type of teachers gain institutional acknowledgement as they are identified as those who are working to achieve academic purposes, particularly if all their discourse and practice are oriented with the strictness that scientific knowledge demands for every discipline. Let us also notice that from the interviewed students, approximately 1 out of 5 expresses absolute rejection to giving a sense of social utility to academic knowledge, without disregarding that around one third has indefinite attitudes.

If we take into account that university formation has among its purposes the conformation of the professional *ethos*, understanding this as the configuration of character based on ethical principles, then we are before a weakness in the students' moral development, whose purpose is that the content knowledge of their profession not only has repercussions on their individual benefit, but also to make a retribution with beneficial deeds for the society who gave them the opportunity to have access to higher education. These are the signs that question teachers' fragile professional ethics who direct their teaching practice under the conviction of scientific academicism.

#### 4.2. Educational Economicism

A wide fringe of teachers is inscribed in a predominantly economic rationality. Most of their decisions do not have the academic area as the most important, instead, is their interest in their work position, the security of their jobs and salaries. Some expressions are the following: "academic life must be the main objective in the university, but before this there is the necessity to negotiate a stable position", therefore they reject any form of questioning to the power of the institution, as "promoting a critical formation places at risk work security". This type of teachers, generally with a low intellectual profile, are looking to solve the necessity for a job, not by their competencies or their own academic convictions about a legitimate university education, but looking for the benefit granted by the submission to bureaucracy with all the consequences expressed in their educational being. In the results of cultural exploration carried out among students we can find in them the acriticism of this type of teachers. A subordinate thought is manifested in the educational relation, which is internalized by the subjects who are under the influence of such non ethical convictions, whose opinions are very eloquent when they say that "we have to be careful with the way we teach, as civic formation in the classroom is to criticize the power of the university and that is putting yourself at risk". And then a phrase which reflects the core of their reasoning: "the only political reflections and social orientation of what we teach that we should have are, the ones that give you economical stability". Teachers' heteronomous thinking not only has consequences on every person who performs teaching in the university, such heteronomy is manifested in the contents, class organization and the aimed goals when forming future professionals. The absence of a minimal ethic when carrying out the teaching practice mediates learning and prevents students' morality (Yurén, 2013) to be at play and help the development of their professional culture.

When identifying that approximately half of the interviewed students are distanced from the ethical-professional features that this research takes as reference, it can be inferred that students under the teaching authority are reproducing a critical and pre conventional schemes, as Kohlberg (1992) would say. A fundamental premise in university education is that it must be based on the learning of scientific and pertinent knowledge in systematically critical perspective, which contributes to the future professional to think on its own and it is always open to confront certainties within its professional field. This educational perspective is annulled when holders of courses say that "there is no need to look for problems where knowledge is already solved, as this will take us to question everything, there is no point to destabilize what has been achieved and create insecurity among students and teachers". This is a strong critical sign of the scarce ethic in the type of university teaching dominated by conservatism and the central concern to keep the job position, even, at the expense of castrating students' creativity and autonomy. An ethical weakness of the teachers is embodied in the type of educational economicism as they do not fulfill the social commitment and the institutional mandate of contributing to the development of professional competencies, as well as forming the university *ethos* in student's culture, where critical vision and vocation from every field of knowledge is one of the guidelines of teaching and learning (UAS, 2006, 2014).

#### 4.3. Innovative Academic Professionalism

A minor segment of the teachers who cooperated through interviews admit that their teaching duties emerge from what the institution establishes, also they point out that students "have as a destination an unfair world which as professionals they will live in", thus a responsible standpoint is that university formation "promotes qualities and ethical wills so that from their profession they help diminish social inequities". This conviction places education in the perspective of professional ethics. This type of teacher's auto critically assumes the ethical weakness observed in students' culture, when acknowledging that "the scarce development of social values corresponds to conservative teaching". They vindicate the principle of caring for the other understanding this as the disposition to contribute to the constitution of the *ethos* among students, creating an educational relation without forgetting that the participants are human beings with economical aspirations but also with needs of fulfillment as a person.

The teachers, who identify themselves with what has here been called innovative academic professionalism, are marginal voices among the interviewees; they reject the idea that their function in the university is reduced to just teaching knowledge and technical abilities, as in their discourse integral formation is present. They say “it is not about forming guerrilla but, insensitive people to a socially conflictive reality either”. In their answers they tend to education oriented by professional ethics when they state that “the learning of academic knowledge and the development of social values are duties for university faculty”. They do not avoid the diverse destinies; their conviction is that “students must be formed to be competent at work and also for a world unfair and full of conflicts”. They are voices giving hope who can contribute to cultural change in the ethical dimension of formation of professionals. Public universities in Mexico have regulations created under common principles. They are oriented with a moral philosophy which demands teachers to guide academic work based on scientific and social values, which are conceived as constitutive elements of the university curriculum (UAS, 2006). Within this context, faculty’s work is found to be inscribed and, therefore, their duties to students’ ethical formation. Such institutional prescriptions are able to be fulfilled, only through a type of innovative education, having as a purpose the development of professional competencies with a technical and cognitive order appropriate for each field of knowledge; however, looking, in addition, to give learning a sense of social usefulness, paying attention to the ethical principles noted within the regulation of institutions, particularly contemplated in the deontological orientations that some universities such as UAS have included in their legal and formative discourse (UAS, 2014).

### **5. Conclusion**

University teachers’ duty not only emanate from the field of knowledge and from what society expects from higher education institutions, they also emerge from what is established in the purposes of the university discourse and each professional career. In education, what is prescribed does not harmoniously turn into actions, as it is reflected in this research, the ethical formation included in the institutional proposal has a weak presence in students’ culture; this is, a wide fringe of the faculty tends to reject and to keep indefinities before ethical principles during their teaching practice. Such assertion is not absolute, among the universe of teachers and students where the cultural exploration was carried out there are signs which allow to relativize this fact given that there is an important segment maintaining convictions and attitudes oriented by professional ethics. Generally, the technical dimension of formation is placed as the only referent to value the quality of university education. Such an aspect is not to be disdained; however, the professional destiny of those who are formed in the university is highly conflictive and socially unfair and invaded by non ethical practices which are weakening the sense of community and peaceful cohabiting. Facing this reality, and taking into account the problematic findings we have identified, the faculty’s professional ethics constitutes an essential cultural device, especially to make out of university formation a space of realization and possibilities imagining that a different world is possible.

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