

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Etică și responsabilitate socială în învățământul superior: răspuns și implicare

José M. Zamora Calvo

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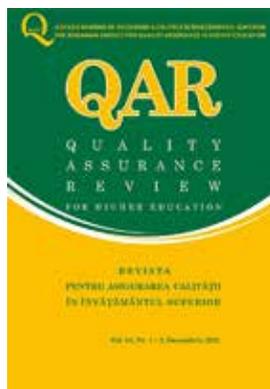
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Ethics and Social Responsibility in High Education: Responding and Accountability

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the analysis of the concept of responsibility from a philosophical perspective, applied to higher education, highlighting its ethical, social and environmental dimensions. The concept of responsibility is crucial in contemporary ethics, from the proposal of the tension between ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility (Weber). Responsible judgment considers humanity as a subject and proposes a revised categorical imperative (Jonas). The ethical responsibility we owe to the world concerns the future of humanity. Responsibility appears in the governance and university structure within the delegation of power in the collegiate bodies. Governing bodies must respond and be accountable to the university community they represent. Service-learning represents a practice of social responsibility that contributes to making the university an ethically responsible institution, with a global and inclusive character in society. Education in social responsibility in research contributes to the search for the common good.*

Keywords: *ethical responsibility, social responsibility, service learning, research ethics, university governance, higher education*

Rezumat: *Lucrarea de fata se concentreaza pe analiza conceptului de responsabilitate dintr-o perspectiva filosofică, aplicata invatamantului superior, evidentiind dimensiunile etice, sociale si de mediu ale acestuia. Conceptul de responsabilitate este crucial în etica contemporană, începând cu propunerea legăturii dintre etica convingerii și etica responsabilității (Weber). Gândirea responsabilă consideră umanitatea ca subiect și propune un imperativ categoric revizuit (Jonas). Responsabilitatea etică pe care o datorăm lumii se referă la viitorul umanității. Responsabilitatea apare în structurile de guvernare și universitară din cadrul delegării puterii în mediul universitar. Managementul trebuie să răspundă și să fie responsabil în fața comunității universitare pe care o reprezintă. Serviciile în folosul comunității reprezintă o practică de responsabilitate socială care contribuie la transformarea universității într-o instituție responsabilă din punct de vedere etic, cu un caracter global și incluziv în societate. Educația în cadrul responsabilității sociale în cercetare contribuie la căutarea binelui comun.*

Cuvinte cheie: *responsabilitate etică, responsabilitate socială, serviciu în folosul comunității, etica cercetării, guvernanta universitară, învățământ superior*

Introduction

The term responsibility is probably one of the crucial terms for understanding ethics and politics. During the last few decades its theoretical packaging and its differentiated treatment, applied to different fields, has been addressed in monographs and specialised articles. However, the origin of the word is recent, since we had to wait until the 18th century to see the coining of the term “responsible” in Spanish, while the use of the word “responsibility” came about in the 19th century. It came into use in French and English much later on.

The concept of responsibility is one of the central categories of ethics. If the capacity to exercise responsibility is not presupposed on the part of the person who acts, there cannot properly be a moral evaluation of the action. Responsibility is a fundamental category that is present in people’s lives. One can be responsible in different spheres: family, social, economic, legal, moral, political, etc. Among the entries that appear in the RAE, responsibility means: (1) Responsible quality. (2) Debt, obligation to make amends by oneself or another person, as a result of a crime, offence or other legal cause. (3) Charge or moral obligation that comes about for someone from a possible error in a certain thing or matter. (4) Capacity existing in every active subject of law to recognise and accept the consequences of a freely performed act.

“Responsibility” is, above all, a debt, a burden, an obligation to make up for an offence or a crime, both in the moral and legal sense; and it is also the capacity of every active subject to recognise and accept the consequences of a freely performed act.

The common etymology of “answer” and “responsibility”: To “answer for” is to commit oneself to one’s actions, to guarantee their validity, to give an account of them and to corroborate them.

I will concentrate on the analysis of moral and social responsibility as applied to higher education, leaving aside other particularly important ones, such as political responsibility or legal responsibility.

Ethics of Responsibility

The notion of “responsibility” from Max Weber’s point of view starts with the tension between “ethics of conviction” and “ethics of responsibility”, trying to corral the misunderstandings derived from it. Rethinking the Weberian ethics of responsibility can help us to rethink social responsibility from a contemporary perspective, returning, on the one hand, to explore the sources of the ethics of responsibility and, on the other hand, assuming the conceptual resources that responsibility provides.

In Weber’s late work, the tension between the ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*) and the ethics of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) appears. The first text dates back to the years immediately preceding the First World War, but was published after his death, in 1921, in the compilation volume entitled *Wirtschaft*

und Gesellschaft (Winckelmann 1964). The formula “ethics of responsibility” does not yet appear, but the “ethics of conviction” is associated with prophetism and, for this reason, is opposed to ritual and legalistic religion. Ritualistic and legalistic religion conforms to the established order, and even tries to justify and preserve it by sacralising the law. The second text, entitled *Politik als Beruf* (1919), related to another publication entitled *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1917/1919), which appears in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (1922) both published after his death in *Gesammelte politische Schriften* (1921). Weber describes the “ethics of conviction” as “absolute ethics”, “a-cosmic ethics” (outside of the world), as opposed to an “ethics of responsibility”, which is a “relative ethics”, “cosmic ethics”.

Responsibility” can be interpreted according to three different meanings that can be interconnected in various ways: (1) The concern and concentration of the subject on a task (being responsible corresponds to taking as seriously as possible the object one is dealing with). (2) Careful consideration of each individual case in order to make appropriate decisions based on the context and the foreseeable medium- and long-term effects, without fear of questioning certain principles. (3) The recognition of their actions and the assumption of their consequences, in particular the repair of any damage caused and, where appropriate, compliance with certain penalties. For Weber, the sense of the second meaning is imposed, which determines the other two. Between “ethics of conviction” and “ethics of responsibility” he establishes an “abysmal opposition”. In contrast to the “ethics of conviction”, which limits itself to doing its duty and, for the rest, entrusting itself to God, and which is not concerned with the ultimate effects of the actions it advocates, the “ethics of responsibility” is responsible for itself, that is to say, it foresees and assumes the consequences of the acts it proposes. The two ethics seem irreconcilable: “Any ethically oriented activity can be subordinated to two totally different and irreducibly opposed core ideas. It can be oriented according to the ethics of responsibility or according to the ethics of conviction” (Weber, *Politik als Beruf* [1919] 1992, 237). The shortcoming of the ethics of conviction is that it establishes a consistency between the end and the means, whereas the ethics of responsibility maintains that the end justifies the means. Now, according to Weber, everyday experience shows us that good can generate evil, and evil can generate good. There is, therefore, as exemplified by Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, no irrefutable correlation between the means and the end.

The presence of the concept of responsibility in contemporary ethics comes from Hans Jonas, who, in *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (German 1979, English 1984), provides us with the cornerstone of a new edifice. According to Jonas, in the face of the unprecedented expansion of our technical capacities, traditional ethics is not sufficient, since it had been elaborated in the context, now obsolete, of a human action incapable of really affecting nature, which is fundamentally immutable. “Nature is no longer as it once was, but precisely our power over it, which from now on distresses us, both for nature’s sake and for our own.”

The *Imperative of Responsibility* uses the concepts of nature and technique considered in their mutual interdependence. Jonas, like Aristotle, interprets nature as the whole of what exists and tends by itself to exist; artificial objects, on the other hand, are produced by technology.

However, technology is going through an unprecedented situation. Jonas speaks to us of an “objective” responsibility that we owe to the world. The new technical power requires new obligations. Hence, how imperative it is to preserve the existence of men in the future: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life”; or negatively: “Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life.” (Jonas 1984, 11). For Jonas it is necessary to *take root in people*, beyond the *subjectivism of values*, the new duty of man that has just appeared (Jonas 1984, 15–19). It is not enough to update Kantian’s categorical imperative. Neither Kantian morality nor Aristotelian ethics are concerned with the effects of our actions beyond the contemporary space for a community of present actors. However, it is about the effects of our actions, or our omissions, on agents beyond this sphere. The criterion of universalisation must not be hypothetical, as in the Kantian imperative, but really conditional: it acts so that there is humanity, and that this humanity is true. Only this version of the imperative, according to Jonas, deserves to be called “categorical” (Jonas 1984, 43–44, 88–89). So that the responsible judgement would now be to consider humanity as the subject and centre of a sort of renewed categorical imperative.

The notion of “responsibility” poses multiple problems. We start with the difficulty and complexity of analysing this category, from different philosophical perspectives, which we will try to project in our current horizon of higher education. Since the Greeks, we tend to identify responsibility with an eminently juridical category that, on certain occasions, appears related to the political sphere, referring in both cases to the field of guilt (Aramayo 2003, 15–19). Moral responsibility, however, concerns above all the individual and cannot simply be generalised to the members of a given collective. It requires active participation of the subjects who take sides in favour of certain facts.

As proposed by Arrieta Heras and De la Cruz Ayuso (2005, 21), we will not deal with responsibility understood as a legal principle, since we start with the hypothesis that social responsibility constitutes a new way of managing organisations insofar as it surpasses and extends the limits of the exclusively legal meaning.

Following the itinerary of Kant, Weber and Jonas, continuing a dialogue with Cruz (1999) and Muguerza (2007), Aramayo (2011) tries to define the restricted field of moral responsibility, highlighting its characteristic features, to better differentiate it from its juridical, political or even psychoanalytical meanings.

Indeed, responsibility implies the need to respond to the consequences generated by a freely accepted action and, in parallel, this need presupposes the capacity of the subject, whether individually or collectively considered, to assume this response (Del Águila Tejerina 2005, 343–344). Thus, for someone to be effectively

responsible, in addition to the capacity to be so, it is required that he or she exercise the freely chosen action.

Power is a *conditio sine qua non* (indispensable condition) of taking responsibility (Jonas 1984, 91). In this sense, it could be argued that impotence absolves us of all responsibility, that is to say, *wanting* is not enough if it is not necessarily accompanied by *power*. In the realm of moral responsibility, any share of responsibility “will always depend on the strength we have to perform or prevent the act for which we are accountable” (Cruz and Aramayo 1999, 30).

Responsibility and University Governance

Accountability, indeed, is a central concept in higher education. Linked as it is to other crucial concepts (academic freedom, research, management, service-learning, university quality assurance, government, governance and university autonomy, continuous assessment, institutional accreditation, electoral processes, creation and recognition of universities, internationalisation, mobility, external academic practices, etc.), responsibility orders and gives meaning to all the others.

The strategic elements that make up higher education correspond to the following: university governance and structure – Faculties, Schools, Departments and Research Institutes –, university funding, teaching, research and transfer, students, teaching and research staff and administration and services staff. University governance is based on ideas such as representation and delegation. The basic factor of university governance and structure is not direct participation in decision-making, but the election of a set of representatives — chancellor, dean, members of the faculty board, staff, department or institute director — who, “in our name”, representing us, govern. This delegation of power to collegiate bodies is at the origin of the government and representation of universities and of the parallel responsibility that we usually demand of those who govern us. For the correct functioning of university structures, this representation must be accompanied by mechanisms that guarantee that the entire institutional framework is based on the consent of the university community and the will of the governed.

The current structure must be adapted to achieve a better relationship between university participation and day-to-day management, in addition to the strategic planning of each university. Delegation and representation only function legitimately if they are accompanied by the accountability of the governing bodies to the university community. The mechanisms of participation and control of university management correspond to the governing bodies of the university, such as the Governing Council and the Faculty; or in the faculties, the Faculty Board and the Department Councils. Participation is a fundamental element that must be regulated and in which the university community, in the exercise of its autonomy, must feel involved. Be that as it may, in university governance there should be no delegation of power without effective responsibility and accountability to those who are delegated. No delegation can be exercised without responsibility for the composition of the

governing bodies, systems of election, mechanisms of control and participation of the university community and society. This link between representativeness and accountability is a key element in understanding how our universities function. Therefore, the existence of a university independent adjudicator is crucial to the existence of effective accountability in higher education institutions.

In order to develop and improve these areas of accountability, it may be feasible to point out the need to give quality assessment agencies a prominent role, professionalising some of their functions, with the aim of generating agile, critical and independent communication between the institutions and society, with the aim of creating a special sensitivity to these issues among the members of the university community that makes it possible to judge accountability without being dragged down by simplistic solutions.

Social Responsibility (RS) and Service-Learning (SL)

Organisations are responsible when they have the capacity or power to act, exercise the power themselves and know the specific circumstances of the action, choose to carry out the action deliberately and consciously, and produce consequences as a result of the action exercised (Arrieta Heras and De la Cruz Ayuso 2005, 33).

Social responsibility represents an emerging dynamic in the current field of higher education. It arises from the increasingly clear awareness of the inevitable impacts that university activity implies in this globalised world. It affects the entire higher education environment — teaching, research, knowledge transfer and management — with a social or environmental impact. But there is one decisive aspect that we will focus on next: Service-Learning (SL). Not only does SL make higher education more humane, but it can also make the university as a whole more humane as a socially and ethically responsible institution. Likewise, it contributes to strengthening proximity and human dimensions, fostering a sense of community and civic commitment (Rubio Serrano and Escofet Roig 2017).

The SL constitutes a practice of university social responsibility that contributes to the university being an ethically responsible institution. Most definitions consider that university social responsibility has to do with an ethical positioning of the university, with the implementation of principles and values for the improvement of the university (Vallaey 2014; Martínez-Usarralde, Gil-Salom, and Macías-Mendoza 2019; Mayor Paredes and Guillen-Gamez 2021). Social responsibility applied to higher education must have a global and integrating character. Its practice affects all the elements that make up all the activities that take place on university campuses: teaching, research, knowledge transfer, management, as well as lifelong learning, work organisation, equal opportunities, social inclusion, sustainable development, etc. All of these must be managed by a university that wants to be socially responsible.

Social responsibility thus has a transversal character that runs through all work related to higher education. The integration of community service with teaching and

reflection constitutes an innovative educational practice that combines curricular learning objectives with social service objectives, where social responsibility takes on a predominant role.

We can argue that for SL to be an educational strategy that helps collective transformation, it needs a focus on social responsibility that prevents it from becoming mere charity, which would reinforce inequality. Such an approach needs to be based on principles and design that deepen reflection and critical thinking for action. We conclude that higher education alone can hardly change society, but without it, it is impossible to do so (Murillo Torrecilla and Aramburuzabala Higuera 2014, 51–53).

Student involvement in SL projects increases social responsibility (García Ramos et al. 2016). The SL is an educational proposal that, applied to higher education, combines curricular learning processes and community service in a single well-articulated project in which the participants, students and teachers, learn by working from the real needs of the environment in order to improve it.

Ethics and Responsibility of Research

The technological development that has taken place in many fields of science and engineering, applied nowadays to almost all disciplines, be they pure sciences or human and social sciences, makes it more necessary than ever to reflect on the knowledge acquired in their progress and their responsibility in the environmental, social and economic changes that affect not only human beings but all living beings. This is why education in social responsibility is also necessary in the field of research in general that is carried out at universities. The World Conference on Science for the Twenty-first Century, held in Budapest in 1999 and co-organised by UNESCO and ICSU (International Council for Science), established that: “The ethics and responsibility of science should be an integral part of the education and training of all scientists. It is important to instil in students a positive attitude of reflection, vigilance and sensitivity to the ethical issues they may encounter in their professional lives” (Article 71). It is therefore necessary, that the university institutions, offer transversal training in the field of ethics and responsibility in research, in order to encourage reflection on research activity and its impact on the society in which we live and the world we inhabit.

In the third chapter of *Ecclesiastes*, “the time of inquiry” (*tempus quaerendi*) is opposed to “the time of loss” (*tempus perdendi*). But, in our field of higher education, the biblical expression of the Vulgate, *tempus quaerendi*, corresponds to the time devoted to research, that is to say, a time that, in practice, lasts forever, since the characteristic of research is to always keep looking, without ever stopping in its pursuit. Therefore, research is a critical attitude that protects us from boredom, laziness, and allows us to keep up to date, always curious and active, intellectually dynamic, with the ability to observe wonderful things, always located at the beginning. Likewise, we must not forget that the pleasure of the quest is even more

important than achieving the result; it is not, in fact, a question of reaching Ithaca, but of making an Odyssey.

The emergence of ethics in this central area of our university way of life should make us sensitive to the fact that responsibility in research also plays an important part in ethical responsibility. A responsibility that must at the same time be sure to sustain our ideas and work methodologies and to combine them adequately with our ideas regarding the common good.

Conclusion

Responsibility is a way of alluding to the condition of agent in action, since, in acting, on our own behalf or on behalf of others, we have an impact on the world and on others, and we have to answer for it. In this case, the focus is not on the origins of an act but on its consequences. Being responsible implies taking responsibility for our past actions and their impact on the present state of the world and taking responsibility for the impacts of an action and its way of influencing the future of the world.

Jonas (1984) mentions an “objective” responsibility that we owe to the world, to the physical environment that surrounds us, and whose preservation guarantees our existence. The earth is threatened and the responsibility for its present and future belongs to all humanity. Therefore, any theory of responsibility must broaden its scope and lead us to take responsibility, not only for the fulfilment of certain principles or accountability to our fellow citizens, but also for nature and the future generations that can only live in it. Curbing the impact of overflowing technology on the earth and on the future becomes the act of responsibility par excellence from which the university cannot remain on the sidelines.

We can distinguish three dimensions of social responsibility: environmental, social and ethical. These three dimensions make up the content thereof and it is necessary to consider all three in order to proceed with an adequate implementation in the field of higher education. However, the integration of socially responsible management in higher education appears to be linked to innovation and quality processes in such a way that a university cannot implement socially responsible management if it does not also focus on innovation and quality. The incorporation of social responsibility into strategic university governance results in the improvement of the quality of education. Its initial costs represent an investment whose benefits have to be interpreted in terms of continuous improvement and obtaining additional competitive and different advantages with respect to educational institutions that do not apply it.

In the European Higher Education Area, higher education is a subjective right for citizens. Social responsibility and university quality assurance make it possible to adapt higher education to move towards a horizon in which science and knowledge occupy the place they deserve, in which the university, with a stable funding model that strengthens it, represents a commitment to the future integrated into the European and international context.

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