Article

University Teachers' Conceptions of the University and the Place of Sustainability

Elisa Chaleta [1,2,*], Margarida Saraiva [3,4], Luís Sebastião [2,5], Marília Cid [2,5], António M. Diniz [1,2], Fátima Leal [2], Paulo Quaresma [6,7] and Luís Rato [6,8]

1   Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, University of Évora, 7000-803 Évora, Portugal; amdiniz@uevora.pt
2   CIEP—Center for Research in Education and Psychology, University of Évora, 7000-803 Évora, Portugal; lmss@uevora.pt (L.S.); mcid@uevora.pt (M.C.); fhleal@uevora.pt (F.L.)
3   Management Department, School of Social Sciences, University of Évora, 7000-803 Évora, Portugal; msaraiva@uevora.pt
4   BRU-UNIDE/ISCTE-IUL, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal
5   Department of Pedagogy and Education, School of Social Sciences, University of Évora, 7000-803 Évora, Portugal
6   Department of Informatics, School of School of Sciences and Technology, University of Évora, 7000-803 Évora, Portugal; pq@uevora.pt (P.Q.); lmr@uevora.pt (L.R.)
7   NOVALINCS—NOVA Laboratory for Computer Science and Informatics, 2829-516 Caparica, Portugal
8   CIMA—Center for Research in Mathematics and Applications, Universidade of Évora, 7000-803 Évora, Portugal
*   Correspondence: mec@uevora.pt

Abstract: In this phenomenographic qualitative research, the aim is to learn about the conceptions of university professors about the university. The study was carried out with 20 university professors: 10 from the School of Social Sciences and 10 from the School of Science and Technology of University of Évora with an average age of 54 years and over 20 years of professional activity. The data were collected through open questionnaires and then submitted to thematic and categorical content analysis. The conceptions of the university appear, in the voice of the teachers, centered on two main aspects. The first and more mentioned concerns the conception of the university as a space of production and diffusion of scientific knowledge, which refers to quality factors of higher education. The second brings out the conception of the university as a space of relationship with society together with underlying concerns for human development, cooperation, and the design of a more sustainable world.

Keywords: conceptions; university teachers; university; quality; sustainability

1. Introduction

The traditional idea of the university as a place of formal education, massified in recent decades by the democratization of societies, is beginning to be questioned regarding its mission. The university, as we know it today, is a changing institution as a result of the remarkable global changes of the 21st century that have forced it to question previous university models and its mission. The discussion on the mission of the university dates back to the 18th century, starting with the proposal of Adam Smith. He advocated a conception of the university committed to the usefulness of knowledge for the progress of society, affirming the importance of knowledge centered on social needs [1,2].

The university as a place of production, legitimization, and dissemination of knowledge has gone into turmoil. This makes it imperative, but almost impossible, to redefine its status and mission in this contemporary world. The current neoliberal shift, in which the "markets" have assumed centrality, is leading universities to the configuration of companies very much oriented towards the cult of efficiency (doing more with less) and consider

knowledge not as an end but as a means (an instrument susceptible to economic added value). The entrepreneurial culture that brought greater freedom and autonomy also led to greater control and verticalization of the organization [2–4]. The effect on universities has led to a shift in the organization from horizontal to vertical models often resulting from legislative changes in the legal regime of institutions., This has caused perplexity among teachers and even leaders, and it has also caused some resistance due to the impact on institutional organization (grouping and concentration/merger of traditional departments and institutes in the name of a certain concept of efficiency reinforced by the imposition of internal and external evaluation mechanisms) and on the redirection of research (from basic to applied) [5,6].

The only milestone that can be mentioned in the context of the changes in higher education, even in the role of an accelerator of these changes over the last two decades, is the Bologna Declaration signed in 1999 by representatives of 29 European countries (currently 47). The document proposed the creation of a European Higher Education Area, competitive at the international level through greater compatibility and comparability of higher education systems, to promote mobility and employability of European citizens. Despite the ambiguous and vague initial objectives [7–9], the long-term perspective of the process, the change of the policy agenda over time [10], and the change of actors involved in the process [11,12], much was achieved in the first decade. The process led to global changes with a strong impact on the harmonization of higher education systems (the three-cycle structure, credits, and recognition of qualifications are now central), the mobility of teachers, students, and staff [13], and the implementation of quality assurance systems [6,9].

An undeniable fact is that higher education is changing at a remarkable speed [3,5,14]. The shift from elite education to mass education is now joined by phenomena such as globalization, the commodification of higher education (knowledge services for potential clients), the close link to society, inclusion agendas (participation, access and equal opportunities), the digital technology revolution, the potential for internationalization, rankings, and state-sponsored quality assessment mechanisms that accentuate competition between institutions [15].

Studies carried out by [16] in several British universities showed collective ambivalence about the desirability of change, ranging from identification with management objectives considered reasonable to identification with traditional and more skeptical academic values [17]. Two lines of thought are emphasized in this field: i) one more conservative, marked by an ideal of higher education, more separated from society, which tries to identify intellectual spaces that justify the university as an end; ii) one more marked by post-modern persuasion based on the idea that the university has only instrumental purposes, or that it is more content with its form than with its own substance. Both positions are limited to the contemporary situation of universities, making it necessary to take a broader view of the complexity of a university inexorably intertwined with society in general and with new universal challenges [18].

Society requires leaders that are capable of tackling the many new challenges faced by companies, governments, and societies in the world at large that require innovative approaches and solutions. In a "supercomplex" and changing world, nothing can be understood with certainty or security, or taken for granted, as we are continually and conceptually challenged by the structures in which we orient ourselves [19]. Supercomplexity involves fragility resulting from social change, technological transformation, and, even more importantly, greater uncertainty in how we understand the world, and how we feel safe to act in that world. It is to be expected that in such a liquid and diffuse picture change will become even more difficult. In addition to this difficulty, a university is facing a critical time of construction of a new identity and is trying to respond to the wishes of the community, the interests of its funders, and the designs of its actors [18].

Depending on the perspective, the threats or challenges the world is facing today are a common denominator for the various societies to which universities cannot be alien-

ated [2,17]. Universities, in addition to contributing to knowledge and innovative solutions, can also play an important role in raising the awareness of new generations and society at large if they take on the responsibility to actively intervene in environmental and social issues resulting from the current development model, thereby contributing significantly to the implementation of a more sustainable development model. This perspective is reinforced by Agenda 2030, which sets out a new global strategy for sustainable development that includes seventeen objectives. These are operationalized in an action plan focusing on people, the planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership [20,21]. Higher education for its work with successive generations and its link to research and innovation is considered essential in helping society face new global challenges [22–24].

The need for a more sustainable world became more evident with the 2008 global financial crisis. Through various initiatives the United Nations (UN) stressed the importance of a global strategy for sustainable development, bringing together businesses, the public sector, and civil society. In this context, higher education is seen as essential for sustainable development given its role in education policy and practice at all levels, particularly in education and research [25,26]. This commitment in universities is advancing with the help of academics (teachers and managers). They individually include the concept of sustainable development in their disciplines and course designs. Despite these initiatives, there is still a long way to go [27].

Although widely used in scientific literature, the term sustainable development presents some diversity of concepts [28]. Its meaning varies according to contexts and areas of application [29,30]. Despite the absence of consensus on the concept, there is general acceptance that sustainable development is about striking a balance between human needs and the environment, and understanding the complex dynamics of interaction between them [31]. There is also a consensus that represents something positive and that, in general, aims at human well-being in the long term by optimizing the management of the environmental system [32].

As a university is traditionally resistant to change [33], it becomes essential to involve all institutional actors in the discussion of what the university is and what it is for in order to make any change possible. It is in this context that we present this study. Thus, we intend to contribute to a deeper knowledge on the way university professors conceptualize the university and, if in their discourses, the idea of quality of higher education and sustainable development is found. The quality of higher education is the most decisive vector for the future of a society [34], and education for sustainable development is the key to face the challenges of today's world and preparing for the future [35].

2. Methods

This study is of qualitative nature and is based on the phenomenographic approach. It aims to infer the meaning of the phenomena for the individual in his natural context, considering the meaning attributed to him [36]. Qualitative research, viewed from a phenomenographic perspective, accepts the existence of multiple realities constructed either individually or collectively and, from this perspective, seeks to understand the phenomena from the perspective of the subjects themselves [37,38]. In summary, the phenomenographic study we present has an exploratory character. It allows us to analyze the conceptions of the subjects by observing their variation and architecture from the descriptions made. This allows us to understand how university professors conceptualize the university today. In this work we will map the conceptions of professors about the university on the basis of their own discourse. Although the analysis is carried out with strict respect for the verbalization and proximity of the subjects' discourse, we will try to find out to what extent crucial aspects for institutions, such as quality (a factor of validation of their own activity) and sustainability (as a social and economic model of development), are contemplated.

2.1. Participants

The selection of participants, in this case university professors, was made subject to prior contact. A total of 20 professors, 10 from the School of Social Sciences (ECS) and 10 from the School of Sciences and Technology (ECT) of the University of Évora, were available to participate in the study.

The participants were aged between 41 and 65 years (average 54 years); nine were female and one male in the ECS, whereas eight were male and two were female in the ECT. Nine professors were between 15 and 20 years of service at the university, eight between 21 and 30 years, and three between 31 and 40 years.

Eighteen professors had a doctoral degree for more than ten years, and only two obtained it in the last five years.

2.2. Instruments and Procedures

This work is part of a wider study on the perspectives professors have on the university today. Initially, we defined from the literature a set of questions that were later carried out in an exploratory study with four professors to ascertain the relevance, clarity, and comprehensibility of the issues. In this work we present the results concerning the question "What is the university for you?"

The teachers were numbered from 1 to 20 (S1 to S10 denote teachers from the School of Social Sciences—ECS; S11 to S20 denote teachers from the School of Science and Technology—ECT).

The analysis of the data was carried out. The criterion adopted was to note only once the statements of each participant belonging to a particular category (and not the number of times they were mentioned), following the principle recommended in cases of mutual exclusion [39].

To check the validity and reliability of the categories of analysis [40] we also checked the inter-rater consensus. The level of agreement between the evaluators was calculated from the Cohen kappa coefficient [41]. It is defined as the proportion of agreement between the judges after the proportion of agreement was removed due to chance. This translates into the following formula: $k = \frac{P0 - Pa}{1 - Pa}$.

In the quantitative analysis of the data, we used simple descriptive statistics and carried out frequency analysis according to sense units or base units [42]. We counted the number of times that each semantic element expressing a distinct idea was present in the discourse (in cases where the same subject repeated the same idea, this was only considered once).

3. Results

3.1. Qualitative Analysis

The answers obtained from the question "What is the university for you?" were submitted to content, thematic, and categorical analyses. The thematic analyses try to reveal the representations, perceptions, or judgments from the examination of certain constitutive elements of a discourse (spoken or written) [43]. Thematic and categorical analyses consist in identifying and comparing the frequencies of certain characteristics previously grouped into significant categories. This way, and by prioritizing the semantic criteria, we define the categories by grouping the units of meaning according to their common characteristics. Table 1 shows the structure of the research obtained.

Table 1. Relationship between the research question and the structure of analysis obtained.

Question	Structure	
	Categories	Subcategories
"What is the university for you?"	1. Production and dissemination of scientific knowledge.	Teaching, learning, and research
		Inter/multidisciplinary space
	2. Relationship with society/world	Human formation and equity
		Economic, social, and cultural development agent

To check the validity and reliability of the categories of analysis, we also checked the inter-rater consensus calculated from the Cohen kappa coefficient [37]. We found an average inter-rater agreement of 96%.

The perception of what the university is was described as highlighting aspects essentially related to its mission today. From the analysis of the teachers' discourse, two categories were identified. The first category includes the discourse on the nature of the university's activity (1—production and dissemination of scientific knowledge), aligned with the idea of quality in higher education. The second category includes the discourse on the university's relationship with society and the world (2—relation with society/world), aligned with the idea of sustainable development.

3.1.1. Analysis of Category 1: Production and Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge

In this category the teachers' discourse focused on two main aspects (subcategories): the conception of the university as a primordial place of (i) teaching, learning, and research and as (ii) inter/ multidisciplinary space.

(i)　Teaching, learning, and research

It is with some naturalness that we saw this dimension emerge, as it reflects the classic mission of a university. The university is seen as committed to the production of science and the transfer of knowledge to the progress of society. This is part of the contemporary concept of a "knowledge society".

We transcribe below some examples that illustrate the teachers' conceptions:

"The place where knowledge is produced and disseminated first hand" (S1) (S2) (S4) (S7) (S8) (S9).

"A system where research takes center stage but feeds back between education and innovation" (S2).

"A space for the production of knowledge through research . . . It is a place for the exercise of inventive intelligence in which students and teachers have to be inhabited by the flame of imagination and fruition" (S3).

"A social and cultural space with extreme responsibility in the learning of knowledge of a scientific nature" (S5).

"A space for training, learning, and research" (S6).

" . . . place where knowledge is taught, learned and developed" (S11) (S14) (S16).

"I understand it as the top of the pyramid of teaching and research . . . seeking excellence individually and collectively" (S13).

"And a scientific training area" (S17) (S19).

"It is the privileged space of . . . creation of knowledge" (S18).

(ii)　Inter/multidisciplinary space

The discourse on the need to respond to new challenges and requiring innovative approaches and solutions from different sources of knowledge shows that the idea has been consolidated in academia. We can see this in the discourse of these teachers:

" . . . is an organizational structure in which the construction and the (re)construction of knowledge takes place in communities that bring together people from the same area of knowledge, or, increasingly, from different areas of knowledge" (S2).

"The university is a space of interdisciplinary events" (S3).

"It is the privileged space for knowledge sharing" (S18) (S20).

3.1.2. Analysis of Category 2: Relationship with Society/World

The university committed to society and to the production of knowledge centered on social needs or problems is considered in the discourse of university professors. In this case, two sub-categories are identified. The first emphasizes the importance of human education beyond the traditional academic formation and the diversity of the public as a positive aspect: (i) human formation and equity. The second highlights the role of the university as a driver of economic, social, and cultural development with a regional, national, or even international/global impact: (ii) agent of economic, social, and cultural development.

(i) Human formation and equity

The teachers highlighted in their speech, in a positive way, the diversity of audiences and the aspect of human education and citizenship in the framework of a globalized world.

"A greater access of students from different social backgrounds, which always enriches us, giving us even more challenging and hard work" (S4).

"A space increasingly connected to life and open to the world" (S5).

"A place that promotes openness to world understanding . . . that should promote attitudes of global citizenship" (S10).

(ii) Economic, social, and cultural development agent

The relationship between the university and society also emerges in the discourses of the teachers contemplating the ease of communication with the world as a result of new technologies, the dynamic interaction with society, and the concern with sustainable development, as we can see in the examples presented below.

"A system in which research takes center stage, but which feeds back between teaching, innovation, and sustainable development" (S2).

"The university is no longer limited to limited spaces. With digital technologies it is also distributed around the world" (S3).

"The University's greater connection to different communities" (S4).

"It plays a central role in society through higher education . . . research . . . and dynamic interaction with society" (S15).

"It acts as an engine of attraction for experts and local, national and international resources . . . empowering people, the economy and culture" (S12).

3.2. Quantitative Analysis

To understand the dimensions that have more weight in the teachers' discourse, we present the analysis of occurrences by counting the units of meaning, where we consider only one reference for each teacher in each category or subcategory. The data are presented for the two groups of teachers according to the school, Social Sciences (SS) and Science and Technology (ST) of University of Évora.

The analysis of Table 2 indicates that teachers from both schools (SS and ST) mentioned more aspects related to the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge (65.5%). They particularly emphasized the university as a space for teaching, learning, and research (53.1%). These are key aspects for the quality system of the universities that currently assess the teaching staff in these dimensions, being at the same time the target of certification by the National Evaluation Agency (A3ES), both for the courses that make up the training offered and for the quality assurance systems themselves. Finally, it seems that teachers from the School of Social Sciences valued human education and equity more than the teachers from the other school did.

Table 2. Teachers' discourse about the university.

Category	Subcategory	SS		ST		Total	
		n	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Production and dissemination of scientific knowledge	Teaching, learning, and research	10	31.3	7	21.8	17	53.1
	Interdisciplinary/ multidisciplinary space	2	6.3	2	6.3	4	12.4
Relationship with society/world	Human education and equity	4	12.4	2	6.3	6	18.8
	Economic, social, and cultural development agent	3	9.4	2	6.3	5	15.7
Total		19	59.4	13	41.7	32	100

4. Discussion

The obtained results reflect the centrality attributed to the classic mission of the university. These are the production and dissemination of knowledge, based on two essential pillars: the teaching and learning binomial, and the production, legitimization, and dissemination of knowledge, as stated by [2]. The idea of an inter/multidisciplinary space could result from the awareness that greater cooperation is needed to address the problems of humanity resulting from uncontrolled globalization and the challenges posed by the socio-economic model, which accentuates environmental and social problems at the global level, as mentioned by [15]. Both are aligned with the idea of the quality of higher education, as stated in [34], where education, and in particular higher education, is the most determining sector for the future of a society.

These data indicate that university teachers reveal a conception of the university committed to the usefulness of knowledge for the progress of society [2] aligned with the contemporary idea of a university inexorably intertwined with society at large and with the new universal challenges [16,18,21,22,35].

According to [34] (p. 10), "existing scientific knowledge, at the pedagogical level in other levels of education, is not transposed to higher education" since "scientific research of teaching-learning processes is practically non-existent within quality systems". In this sense, it is necessary to investigate other forms of intervention, and the very internal and external organization of the Higher Education InstitutionsI, to improve the overall effectiveness in fulfilling their mission.

Aspects related to the vision of the university in close relation with society and the world emerge with less expression in the teachers' discourses (34.5%), although they show that there is attention to the role that universities can have in building a more sustainable world.

5. Conclusions

After its transformation into modernity as an institution of higher education, the university has assumed a prominent place in societies. It has adopted various models of organization and transmission of knowledge, resulting from the link between education, society, economy, politics, and culture. Contemporary life, marked by remarkable global changes, has accentuated the discussion around the mission of the university.

We identified a much-centered classical conception of the university mission (teaching, learning, and research) by the university professors, translated into a vision with a greater focus on academic activity. This may result from a professional identity built two or three decades ago that remains in place because these are the dimensions evaluated in the teaching activity and certified by national and international evaluation agencies.

The way they conceptualize the university also contemplates the conception of higher education beyond what is strictly academic. This includes the idea of educating human beings to become citizens that are more intertwined with society, and with the vision of not ignoring environmental and social challenges, thereby leading to a higher commitment to sustainable development.

This includes the idea of educating human beings to become citizens who are more interconnected with society and with the vision of not ignoring environmental and social challenges, thus leading to a greater commitment to sustainable development.

Although our study has its limitations, such as the number of participants involved and those inherent to the established system of categories and analysis, it can be a first alert for an in-depth study of how teachers conceptualize the role of the university in a world that will inevitably have to adopt a more sustainable model.

Moreover, an extensive study based on the current results could be put in place. A large-scale survey using a questionnaire with a factorial structure grounded from the emergent categorical structure, and with respective content derived from sentences of the participants, could be used. This study could then enlighten if social sciences teachers value human education and equity more than science and technology teachers do.

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