

The academy and its interaction with communities through society engagement programs

La academia y su interacción con las comunidades a través de los programas de vinculación con la sociedad

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Abstract

Academia plays a crucial role in connecting higher education with the real demands of communities through social engagement programs. These programs aim to apply knowledge acquired in the classroom to specific social, economic, and cultural contexts, thus promoting local problem-solving and sustainable development. Collaboration between universities and communities enables comprehensive education for students, promoting values such as social responsibility, solidarity, and civic engagement. Communities, in turn, benefit from the technical, scientific, and human support provided by higher education institutions, generating a reciprocal learning process. Overall, university engagement is established as a strategic pillar for social development, knowledge transfer, and the positive transformation of the community environment. The methodology applied was mixed, as it allowed for the analysis and measurement of the relationship between academic institutions and communities. The paper concludes by demonstrating that engagement with society is established as a crucial foundation of university work, combining teaching, research, and community service.

Keywords: local communities, educational management, higher education institutions, problem solving, know-how transfer.

Resumen

La academia desempeña un rol crucial en la conexión entre la educación superior y las demandas reales de las comunidades a través de programas de vinculación social. Estos programas tienen como objetivo aplicar los conocimientos adquiridos en el aula a contextos sociales, económicos y culturales específicos, fomentando así la resolución de problemas locales y el desarrollo sostenible. La colaboración entre universidades y comunidades permite una formación integral para los estudiantes, promoviendo valores como la responsabilidad social, la solidaridad y el compromiso cívico. A su vez, las comunidades se benefician del respaldo técnico, científico y humano que brindan las instituciones de educación superior, lo que genera un proceso de aprendizaje recíproco. En conjunto, la vinculación universitaria se establece como un pilar estratégico para el desarrollo social, la transferencia de conocimiento y la transformación positiva del entorno comunitario. La metodología que se aplicó fue mixta, ya que permitió el análisis y la medición de la relación entre las instituciones académicas y las comunidades. Se concluye el trabajo demostrando que la conexión con la sociedad se establece como un fundamento crucial de la labor universitaria, al combinar la enseñanza, la investigación y el servicio a la comunidad.

Palabras clave: acción comunitaria, gestión académica, instituto de enseñanza superior, solución de problemas, transferencia de conocimiento.

Introduction

Universities are social institutions whose mission is carried out through three core functions: the education and training of professionals and researchers, the creation and dissemination of knowledge, and engagement with the community. These elements have been present since the earliest universities, although the ways in which they are implemented have evolved over time.

The university stands as an institution that serves society as a whole; it influences and helps shape social dynamics while also acting as an educational reference point for students, faculty, and the broader community. For these institutions, development should focus on improving the quality of their services and strengthening their connections with society, businesses, and the external environment. In this sense, both professional and academic education should become more accessible and more closely integrated with business and institutional contexts (Paleari et al., 2015).

“The university is committed to society; it is an agent of change capable of generating both theoretical and practical knowledge that enriches the growth and development of individuals. This is essential for solving problems through projects that foster reciprocal interaction between the university and the community, contributing to national development in all its dimensions” (Zea, 1981).

Community engagement is one of the core functions of higher education in Ecuador, as established by the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES) and the Academic Regime Regulations (RRA). According to Article 117 of the LOES, engagement is considered a fundamental function of universities, while Article 4 of the RRA defines it as a function that builds capacity and promotes knowledge exchange based on the academic strengths of higher education institutions. Its purpose is to ensure effective responses to the needs and challenges of their surrounding environment (Flor, 2020).

Community engagement in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is one of their core functions, serving as a key link between academia and both public and private sectors. Its purpose is to strengthen teaching and research through the active interaction of faculty and students in its implementation. Each initiative establishes its own specific goals; however, most aim to enhance social development and improve citizens' quality of life, while also enriching the experiential learning process for the students involved (Vásquez & Bermeo, 2021).

Academia plays a crucial role in carrying out community engagement, as it participates in, observes, and experiences the changes that occur in both beneficiaries and students. This positions it as a generator of knowledge and a source of solutions to social challenges across different disciplines and sectors where they are needed. In this sense, it seeks to integrate community engagement with the core pillars of education—teaching and research—as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Mission Triptych of Higher Education Institutions



Resource: Flor (2020). Prepared by: Ochoa et al. (2025).

Universities are responsible for fulfilling their mission through three fundamental pillars: teaching, research, and engagement with society. These elements are closely interconnected, fostering a two-way flow of communication among them. Teaching should be grounded in research findings, while research, in turn, should be guided by the needs of society. However, a common criticism of universities is their disconnect from the real world, often conducting research in isolated settings and overlooking the genuine needs of communities. Therefore, it is essential for universities to adopt an approach that enables them to play an active role in economic development (Soleimani et al., 2016).

Universities not only generate knowledge but also have the responsibility to transfer it to society. The mere production of knowledge does not guarantee its dissemination or its ability to drive innovation and economic growth. In fact, knowledge becomes a key engine for economic development only when universities share it and stakeholders put it into practice (Audretsch, 2014).

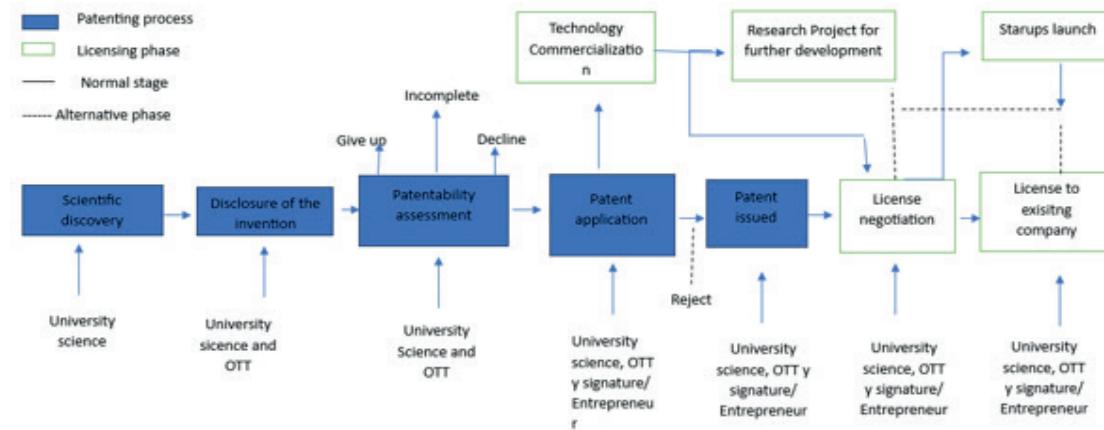
Technology transfer (TT) between universities and industry represents a form of collaboration aimed at achieving a range of specific objectives. Beyond producing knowledge, universities support businesses in developing practical applications, positioning themselves as key partners in the knowledge economy. From a knowledge perspective, TT can be understood as a process through which knowledge, experience, and information are shared or acquired between entities. In this context, TT programs are essential to the core functions of universities—teaching, research, and community engagement—by providing: a mechanism for transferring relevant research outcomes to society; guidance for researchers on managing relationships with industry; a framework for promoting and facilitating applied research; a source of flexible funding for additional projects; and expertise in licensing and contract negotiation (Feng, Chen, Wang, & Chian, 2012).

As noted by Valverde and Soto (2007), this process can begin with the provision of specialized services and training programs. It can then evolve into consultancy agreements and technical assistance in areas where the university has strong expertise, eventually progressing to more advanced stages linked to research. Figure 2 illustrates the technology transfer process in universities. For an institution to successfully carry out effective

technology transfer, it is essential to have a strong research base and a highly qualified team of researchers with international-level competitiveness, as research and development (R&D) outputs are the key resource that drives technology transfer (Valverde & Soto, 2007).

Figure 2

Technology Transfer Process in Universities



Resource: Tseng & Raudensky (2014). Prepared by: Ochoa et al. (2025).

From this perspective, research plays a crucial role in enabling technology transfer (TT), and without TT, it is difficult to build a meaningful connection with society. In other words, technology transfer allows universities to engage with their communities in a reliable and impactful way. Therefore, it is essential for universities to recognize that the knowledge they generate and share should be aligned with social, economic, and political needs, contributing to the development of sustainable, long-term solutions.

Universities occupy a unique position in society by bringing together experts in research and development and by treating knowledge creation as a socially distributed process (Necoechea-Mondragón & Pineda-Domínguez, 2013). Likewise, Barreno Salinas, Barreno Salinas, and Olmedo Valencia (2018, p. 41) argue that higher education should be a transformative and meaningful learning process.

For this reason, it is important to promote values-based education across society, as well as training in diverse areas of knowledge. Strengthening the sense of social responsibility that connects academia with society is key, so that professionals are better prepared to address real-world needs and challenges in different contexts. The ultimate goal is to provide solutions to concrete problems, creating a strong link between academic training—both theoretical and practical—and its application in the labor market.

When outreach and community engagement are carried out, theory is not only put into practice; research and science are also advanced. More importantly, comprehensive solutions are created for the most vulnerable communities. All of these outcomes are generated by the students of the University of Guayaquil. However, this impact is lost when the results achieved are not communicated in a visible, clear, simple, efficient, and effective way.

Methods

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically through a documentary or bibliographic method. The work was developed by reviewing, analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing information from both written and digital sources, including books, scientific articles, and technical reports.

In addition, the expertise and professional experience of the contributors were incorporated to enrich the study. As educators, we have actively participated in the various community engagement programs developed by the university. It is important to not only build commitment within the classroom but also to bring that commitment into real-world contexts through interaction with the community. These initiatives address a range of local challenges, contributing to social development through academic and research-based activities.

This is supported by a structured Community Engagement Plan, through which Higher Education Institutions commit to working responsibly in accordance with the guidelines established by the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES, 2010).

Results

This documentary research presents and discusses findings reported by Schindler et al. (2015), who identified a Quality Framework and a set of indicators based on the involvement of four stakeholder groups. The outcomes of this work are summarized in Figure 3.

Each of the approaches analyzed contributes to fulfilling the mission of higher education institutions. The first approach focuses on meeting the requirements established by regulatory bodies, using institutional indicators as a means of assessment and evidence. The second approach examines the changes observed in students, particularly in terms of affective development.

The exceptional and responsible approaches fall within the scope of higher education institutions themselves. Meeting these criteria and indicators is essential to ensure compliance with the standards required by governing bodies.

Figure 3

Quality approach and indicators

Quality Approach	Indicators
Intentional approach: specifications, requirements, or standards defined by accreditation and/or regulatory bodies. Transformational approach: institutional products and services produce a positive change in students' learning (domains: affective, cognitive, and psychomotor) and in their personal and professional potential. Exceptional approach: institutional products and services achieve distinction and exclusivity through compliance with high standards. Responsible approach: institutions are accountable to stakeholders for the optimal use of resources and the delivery of precise educational products and services with zero defects.	• Fulfillment of the mission and vision • Transparent objectives and processes • Compliance with standards • Achievement of institutional objectives • Student-centered approach • Competent teachers • Clarity of results • Development of critical thinking • Student commitment to content • Credibility • Legitimacy • Reputation • Category • Preparation of students for the labor market • Acquisition of quality resources • Sufficient infrastructure • Focus on continuous improvement

Resource: Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, (2015). Prepared by: Ochoa et al (2025)

Discussion

Community engagement has become a key component of the higher education system, as it fosters meaningful interaction between universities and society. This process is not only aimed at complying with the legal requirements established by the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES), but also at strengthening the social commitment of educational institutions by addressing real needs within their surrounding environments.

In recent years, Ecuadorian universities have developed community engagement projects that tackle a wide range of issues, including community development, health, education, entrepreneurship, and environmental sustainability. These initiatives have provided both students and faculty with valuable opportunities to apply their knowledge in real-world settings, creating a positive impact on communities while also contributing to the holistic development of students.

Conclusions

Community engagement strengthens the social role of Higher Education Institutions by connecting academic knowledge with the real needs of the country.

It contributes to the country's sustainable development by addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges.

It helps shape professionals who are ethically aware and socially committed, capable of using their knowledge to benefit the community.

It is both an academic and regulatory requirement, recognized by governing bodies (CES and CACES) as an indicator of quality in higher education.

It promotes meaningful learning and innovation by enabling students and faculty to engage directly with the community and learn from real-world experiences.

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