How can we improve interaction between society and the university?

In the Fifth workshop of the Metrics Project, we were presented with a challenge: *How can we improve interaction between society and the university?*

In this brief comment, I will argue that effective communication is one of the key instruments in this task. By effective communication, I mean the capacity to provide meaningful information to society and the government. There is no doubt that universities have a responsibility to explain, engage in and debate their real purpose and value with society and the government. Nevertheless, many questions arise in this context, and we will approach them here:

Society, politicians and policy-makers put pressure on universities, insisting on the relevance of both research and teaching. They argue that universities must respond better to national economic and social needs in their research; and to the labor market by turning out employable graduates.

Furthermore, in publicly funded universities there is a tension between institutional autonomy and local and national priorities; if universities enjoy a high level of public funding, the government and taxpayers expect to have some influence on the direction universities pursue.

These are important concerns.

Universities must be transparent about their activities, revenues and expenditures. Furthermore, in addition to economic value, there also needs to be a wider debate about the societal importance and value of universities. Through research, public universities generate new knowledge and understanding, which is an important human endeavor in its own right. At the same time, relevance of high-end research is hard to gauge, particularly for basic research where relevance and impact can take decades to become fully apparent.

In other words, being able to effectively communicate the importance of the value of universities is no longer merely a noble pursuit, but a matter of survival.

The literature suggests that social media activity can help to build a university brand, and that the millennial generation expects fast and direct interaction from their colleges and universities. This means that these institutions are having to respond and adapt or abandon their traditional marketing and branding approaches.[1] No doubt, this is a legitimate way to communicate efficiently, but that is not what this is about.

The challenge is to guarantee that society and the government trust in and are aware of the local and the national relevance of public universities.

This is our Achilles' heel, since ineffective communication feeds the vicious cycle of unfair questioning on the purpose, value and cost effectiveness of our public universities.

As I personally observed over years working in the government of the State of São Paulo, as Deputy Secretary for Higher Education and as legal advisor to several governors, universities' annual reports are not understood, or worse, they are subject to being ignored or distorted.

Clusters of relevant data were simply left out, maybe because they were too large, too detailed, and too complex to understand or because there was simply no interest. Nobody read them; they were not considered significant information by public officials.

On the other hand, during the years I've worked as the Deans Chief of staff and Secretary General at the University, I could followed the detailed preparation of these reports and the importance of historic and statistical series of data. Both personal experiences showed me how ineffective public universities' communication can be, despite the accuracy and quality of data

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[1] Richard Rutter, Stuart Roper, Fiona Lettice,
Social media interaction, the university brand and recruitment performance,
Journal of Business Research, Volume 69, Issue 8, 2016, Pages 3096-3104,
ISSN 0148-2963, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.025.
(http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296316000382)

contained within them. I also doubt that the public information on universities made available on Internet is ever accessed.

Those impressions were recently confirmed in the investigation promoted by the Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo, to investigate "possible irregularities in the management of the three public universities of São Paulo". Most of the huge amounts of data and details requested by parliamentarians was not even mentioned in the conclusions of the investigation that finally attested to the inexistence of irregularities.

In contrast, during the COVID 19 pandemic, scientific and technological contributions from the universities have been highly revalued by the society as a whole and by most politicians and parliamentarians.

What did we learn from these facts?

Assuming that continual responsiveness to society is a key characteristic of public university values, the meaning of "significant information" reaches far beyond bureaucratic reports or even social media postings.

Considering the personal experiences I described above, a simple annual report about the **"State of the University**" could be an effective tool of communication. This would be an opportunity for universities to review the past year's accomplishments and set their agenda for the coming year. It would encompass societal accountability, with the purpose to provide direct dialogue, outside the administrative and bureaucratic instances of public administration.

A brief report of the most important activities and contributions from the previous year, as well as the identification of areas for future growth, accompanied by a succinct financial report, would be enough to start and qualify the dialogue. This can be a way of engaging social actors and the government in constructing a vision of the future of the universities, as well calling attention to national and local relevance of universities.

The regular publication of a **State of the University** would be based on information from the Pro-vice-chancellors, which is then edited by specialists in social communication who form, at the *Jornal da USP*, for example, a niche of specific competence. Unicamp, Unesp and other universities based in the

State of São Paulo have the same competences to bring this innovation into being.

It is a fact that the expectations of society towards universities and their perception of their own role are in constant flux. It is our responsibility, therefore, to stay ahead and explain, engage in and debate the real purpose and value of universities.