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**Civic Education and Social Commitment among
University Students**
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1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen growing international concern in Western democracies about the lack of social commitment among young people, shown in their failure to participate in social affairs, scant interest in formal politics, and low turnout at elections (Saha, et al. 2007; Print, Milner, 2009).

Though it is true that, as some authors point out (Benedicto, López, 2008) that sometimes there is an overabundance of negative or reductionist diagnostics on the lifestyles of young people, it is nevertheless important to make a few observations. For example, it may be asked if there is more social and political apathy among young people than among older people. If such a claim is doubtful, it is logical that it is worrying especially among young people. In either case, it is a fact that both the young and the old lack a culture of politics or ethics, and that lack leads to omissions in one's duties as a citizen.

The aim of this paper is to delve deeper into these matters by analysing universities as areas for civic and ethics education. The final goal is to look into the role that a suitable education in this matter may play in evoking civic commitment among university students.

2. International Panorama

Spain's university students seem to identify less and less with the political institutions and customs of our current markedly individualistic society in terms of values, lifestyles, and risks (Ingelehart, Welzel, 2005). The consequences of this situation range from electoral absenteeism to social exclusion or juvenile violence, to cite a few (Sloam, 2007).

Many countries have shown their concern in recent years over the impact these social problems have on political participation, national identity, and democratic citizenship (Crick, 2004; Stoker, 2006). These are some of the reasons why education is being re-examined in its ethical and civic dimension in a search for an answer or solution to many of these social problems (Kisby, Sloam, 2009), sometimes overzealously viewing education as a cure-all for every danger. Some examples of this international trend are the introduction of "civic, legal and social education" (*éducation civique, juridique et sociale*–ECJS) in France in 1999 (Tournier, 2006); the introduction of citizenship education classes in English schools in 2002 (DFEE/QCA, 1998; Benton, et al., 2008); and the "learn and live democracy" program developed in Germany (Sliwka, et al., 2006).

Research carried out by the IEA (Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) has shown that when civic education is appropriately integrated into the curriculum, citizenship education has positive effects on fostering civic and political commitment (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001). Nevertheless, less attention has been paid (with a few exceptions: Ahier, et al., 2003; Arthur, Bohlin, 2005, among others) to the ethical and civic dimension of higher education in Europe (Sloam, 2008) in the field of education and in the field of education policy.

However, in some of the English-speaking countries (notably, the USA, Canada, and, in part, the UK), the institutions of higher education spend a great deal of their resources on

initiatives such as service-learning (community volunteer service integrated into the curriculum: Battistoni, 2000), and there is competition between them to be recognised as “colleges with a conscience”. Some studies present evidence that activities such as service-learning have the virtue of improving the students’ academic scores (Colby, et al., 2003 and 2007).

In regard to its proper place in the curriculum, there is no unanimity: both courses specifically dedicated to civic affairs as well as approaches that involve the entire university institution all have their pros and cons (McCowan, 2009). In any case, it highlights the social responsibility that higher education has (Plantan, 2002).

Institutions of higher learning have the capability and responsibility of informing the political processes, and of using the resources at their disposal to solve contemporary problems. Specifically, universities have a civic responsibility for being agents of social change.

3. Civic and Ethics Education of University Students and the Third Mission of the University

With its universal character, the university seems to contribute to raising the level of social harmony and development among persons and peoples. But does the university have a mission to educate? The question is not new in an absolute sense but is new in terms of orientation and perspective of analysis on aspects that are most related to social cohesion, or to forming identity, a national conscience, or a civic culture.

If political disaffection is growing among young people, we must look deeply into the causes and outline the creation of our re-use of areas where they can readily express their concerns, complaints, and alternatives.

It is worth bearing in mind that recent studies (Jacoby, 2009; Mcilrath, Labhrainn, 2009) suggest that participation in projects of civic commitment may be related to the rise or consolidation of professional vocations linked to development and cooperation for that goal, almost always within parameters of sustainability.

As Barber (1998) noted, it is not that the university has a civic mission, but rather, that the university *is* a civic mission; it is civility in and of itself, he added, defined through the rules and conventions that facilitate dialog in a community and the kind of discourse on which all knowledge depends.

If the university were not a good place to cultivate and practice civic virtues (as are schools, families, and businesses), what sense would there be to all the discourse (some fairly rhetorical) on the invaluable connection universities have with their surroundings, with community life and the needs that can become a boon to generating new ideas or designing projects of the most diverse kind (Santos, Lorenzo, 2007 a, b)?

Achieving this is, in our opinion, an educational objective: in short, the point is for people to assume their role as citizens. As a result, preparation for the job market and education for becoming active citizens are presented as the two most relevant objectives of education in the upcoming decades and also as two of the key goals for university education.

They are sometimes presented as being at loggerheads when interpreting the third mission of universities (their social commitment) of two different kinds: one we may say more “economistic” and another that looks more at civic and social aspects. The first focuses more on the business innovation that can be fostered from the university, while the other aims more at service and commitment to the community (Montesinos, et al., 2008, 262).

Most likely, the most common interpretation is the business-related one (Vorley, Nelles, 2008, 5); this third mission is sometimes presented with an overly narrow view when speaking of the transfer of knowledge. This interpretation uses the language of patents, innovation, corporate spin-off companies from universities, interface specialists, etc. (Etzkowitz, et al., 2000).

The alternative social interpretation points the university toward commitment to civil society and includes concepts such as the university’s commitment to the community, or universities being spoken of as areas for citizenship and civic responsibility (Plantan, 2002).

These last few years have witnessed a movement that demands greater attention to the civic role of the institutions of higher learning in response to the needs of society (Kezar, 2005). In this scenario, the lack of student commitment in its diverse forms often appears in the literature and reflects the challenges that universities face when designing curricula to help develop the competencies required in society today (Evans, 2004; Bok, 2006; Côté, Allahar, 2007; Kronman, 2007; Rochford, 2008).

Defining what those “competences” are is a difficult task. It may be said they are complex structures of processes that people put into action to solve problems and carry out activities aimed at constructing and transforming reality.

Civic education at the university could then consider three objectives directly related to the acquisition of two types of competences: some of a specific nature or competences for exercising citizenship, and others of a generic nature, or ethical competences:

- Education aimed at teaching the person to be able to develop and guide his or her way and style of life
- Education aimed at discovering and accepting that ways and styles of life that are upheld on criteria of justice, equality, and dignity are the only ones that are legitimate and suitable
- Education specifically for exercising rights and responsibilities of citizenship and for participating effectively in debates and decision-making

Achievement in the first two would involve learning ethical competences, whereas the third would involve learning competences for exercising citizenship.

Our task is, at least partly, to work together in preparing our students to develop their education autonomously in situations of social interaction. Yet that same society urgently requires participatory citizens who can produce shared living spaces that are freer, fairer, and more inclusive.

We are aware that there has been an excessive increase in individualism as a way of life and as a way of understanding the world at the university as well as in society at large. Thus, much of the work done to promote civic commitment at universities focuses on promoting the commitment of the students through curricular initiatives such as service-learning and through extra-curricular volunteer programs for students to undertake.

In this commitment to finding formulas for bringing values education into university studies, different methodologies are being tested, such as exercises in discussion and deliberation, research and political action projects, discussion of dilemmas, problem-based learning and cooperative learning (Colby, et al., 2003, 2007). The one that stands out the most in terms of both its widespread implementation and the results it attains is service-learning (Martinez, 2008). Not only is this methodology widely contrasted (Naval, 2008), it is worth paying attention to because of the ends it pursues: to educate citizens and give meaning to knowing.

Service-learning is an educational proposal that combines learning processes and processes of community service into a single, coherent, and cohesive project (Puig, et al., 2006, 22).

4. Reflections and Proposals

The horizon sketched out in this paper suggests the advisability of paying attention to three aspects in teaching university students:

1. Understand community as something specifically theirs; be aware of belonging to it.
2. Have the capacity for dialogue, respect, and tolerance; skill at finding information and enforcing one's rights, and sensitivity to the common good.
3. Be able to judge critically the information they receive from the media, teachers, family, Internet, etc.; be able to put themselves in the other's shoes and take on and carry out whatever actions they are committed to.

A necessary condition for fostering critical citizens is to offer real opportunities to become involved in analyzing and solving immediate problems not only in the local community, but at the national and global level as well.

In that sense, education for citizenship is a responsibility of the university institution and not something merely subordinate in higher education (Naval, 2003; Repáraz, et al., 2009; Naval, et al., 2010). Most problems in society today are not only technical or scientific in nature, but rather, they require background in ethics and an ability for social analysis that are difficult to improvise. To have opportunities for action and learning, the university must consider the existence of a time and a space in the curriculum aimed specifically at that end.

Thus, regardless of the field of study chosen, it would be advisable to offer every university student the chance to:

- Awaken and enhance their moral sensitivity: prepare them better to identify ethical problems and, as professionals, avoid making decisions based on ignorance.
- Acquire knowledge on relevant values: learn minimum democratic values and important professional values as well as helping them become personally clearer.
- Enable them to take ethical decisions: the decision-making process is susceptible to teaching-learning. Anyone hoping to have a career would need to learn more about profession ethics.
- Become more autonomous: suitably deal with peer pressure and pressure from society. Education can be used to help students develop the courage to behave ethically.

In short, our proposal for education is addressed at finding a place in the curriculum and is aimed fundamentally at three ends:

1. Knowledge of the civic rights and duties of every citizen, and of students in particular, which may be called *education in civic rights and duties*.
2. Becoming more sensitive by knowing more about the civic possibilities and outcomes of the chosen profession, which may be called *information and education in professional deontology*.
3. Education in designing and performing service programs. This means offering chances for them to design community service projects and for them to become involved in carrying them out.

In terms of the contents, it is suggested that the education be focussed on these areas:

I. *Civic and citizen education*

II. *Deontological education*

III. *Development of autonomy and decision-making*

IV. *Participation in Service Projects*

In short, these contents will help students become aware of their own potential as well as their shortcomings by making them more knowledgeable of their intellectual capacities, of the characteristics of their personality, of their own interests and of a progressive structuring of their value system. The final objective is for them to learn to make decisions in relation to the evolution of society today, their professional training, and the effects they may have on the common good.

What is intended in this paper is not to give a closed proposal, but to offer a basis for discussion and reflection that can better guide the endeavours of education.

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