

EN

EDITORIAL

The open door university

The ecology of knowledge is, so to speak, a kind of extension in the opposite direction, from outside into the university.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

The university, as a concept, as an institution and as a project, is fully immersed in an opening-up process. Far from an inward-looking academic community defined by its shared disciplines, whose existence is legitimated through the production and validation of scientific knowledge, the model of the outward-facing university is gaining momentum, a model of conversation and cooperation between the institution and the environment to which it belongs. This is no trivial change. It affects the mission that higher education must embrace to face the difficult times and multiple challenges this century poses. Neither is this change based on exclusivity. Rather, it aligns with the requirements diverse international institutions have established for all formal education organisations. In its latest report on the futures of education, UNESCO urges members of all societies to build a new social contract, an educational commitment to shape shared, interdependent futures grounded in social, economic and environmental justice.

This is a direct call for universities to actively participate in constructing the new social contract and has far-reaching repercussions in the way they implement social responsibility. As well as their research and scientific work, universities must also commit to consolidate education as a common heritage, based on the understanding that education is a form of wellbeing that we share and achieve together. The university's mission is therefore to meet this requirement and to assume its responsibility as a cooperative and creative agent of scientific and cultural knowledge. This entails cooperating to construct a shared vision of what the purposes of education are, which in turn implies looking at education holistically, that is, adopting a perspective that incorporates all the knowledges, spaces and times that shape it. Among other aspects, this demand calls for a review of the traditional boundaries between education and culture; fictitious boundaries that, while they have always revealed their fragility, are now being dismantled, opening the way for numerous collaborative experiences. This edition of *kult-ur* examines on some of these practices that, through



university extension programmes, are helping to reinvigorate and transform the university–society relationship.

If we want solid, independent, credible and innovative universities, they must review their research, educational and cultural functions through a contextual and relational lens. To do this, another barrier must be pulled down, one that has strategically – but falsely – separated the three activities of the university: education, research and culture. Most universities have compartmentalised their activities in such a way that culture is complementary to research and teaching activities. It is sometimes treated as a form of assisting, an activity designed to bring culture to certain areas or groups. Other times, this university extension is rendered as a model of technological transfer or to sell services to meet market needs. Whatever the case, it comes from a perspective in which the institution contributes something from its science, its knowledge and its cultural output or management to other spaces. Extension therefore increases to the extent that the university increases its offer, expands and moves into those spaces. However, the UNESCO proposal appears to be underpinned by a different rationale. Extending the university is not about colonising a place of knowledge or replacing or creating knowledge hierarchies. Extension is about broadening the dynamics of dialogue and participation with the community, opening channels to nourish and develop culture and education from an ecology of knowledge.

Particularly relevant in this definition of university extension are the contributions from the Latin American model that emerged at the start of the twentieth century, initially with reforms in Argentina which then spread across the rest of the continent. Grounded on the principle that the university must be democratised in order to democratise society, it offers an interesting counterpoint to the neoliberal inertia that has swept through European universities since the Bologna Process was implemented. Currently, the inspiration driving university extension in this model is Freire's dialogic approach, so rather than extension, it is about university–society communication. This communication pivots on the recognition of interaction with society as the engine and possibility for education, culture and social transformation. Thus, university extension is central to the university's identity and affects all its other functions and its governance. Because hybridising university research, teaching and cultural activity is just as important as generating scientific, artistic, cultural and communication synergies with the surrounding community, universities are urged to develop governance and management models that allow this opening up to take place.