

ARTICLE

What do we mean when we talk about territorial commitment of universities? A reflection on Chilean state universities

¿De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de compromiso territorial de las universidades? Una reflexión a propósito de las universidades estatales chilenas.

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Received: 18/04/2023

Accepted: 18/05/2023

How to cite

Labraña, J., Rodríguez-Ponce, E., Puyol de la Fuente, Francisca. (2023) What do we mean when we talk about territorial commitment of universities? A reflection on Chilean state universities. *Propuestas Críticas en Trabajo Social - Critical Proposals in Social Work*, 3 (6), 6-22. DOI: 10.5354/2735-6620.2023. 70760.

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to propose a definition of territory for the field of higher education studies, associating it with the idea of institutional learning in universities. First, the uses of the concept of territory in the higher education literature are examined and an operational definition is proposed from the social systems theory, highlighting the idea of selectivity associated with the construction of territory from university organizations. Next, Chilean higher education regulations are reviewed, identifying the relevance of territory in the mission of state universities. Using the proposed conceptual definition of territory as the

Keywords:
Higher education;
universities;
territory

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October 2023. Vol. 3, Num. 6, 6-22. ISSN 2735-6620, DOI: 10.5354/2735-6620.2023. 70760.

internal construction of higher education institutions, and in line with the literature on institutional learning, a model is introduced to analyze the relationship between state universities and territory which, considering reflection as the central axis, underlines the importance of knowledge, the distribution and interpretation of information and the development of an organizational memory. The article ends with a brief summary and possible lines of research in the area.

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es proponer una definición de territorio para el campo de estudios en educación superior, asociándolo a la idea de aprendizaje institucional de las universidades. Primero, se examinan los usos del concepto de territorio en la literatura de educación superior y se propone una definición operativa desde la teoría de sistemas sociales, subrayando la idea de la selectividad asociada a la construcción del territorio desde las organizaciones universitarias. A continuación, se revisa la normativa chilena de educación superior, identificando la relevancia del territorio en la misión de las universidades estatales.

Entendiendo conceptualmente territorio como la construcción interna de las instituciones de educación superior, y en línea con la literatura sobre aprendizaje institucional, se introduce un modelo para analizar la relación entre universidades estatales y territorio. Este modelo, que tiene como eje central la reflexión, subraya la importancia del conocimiento, la distribución e interpretación de información y el desarrollo de una memoria organizacional. El artículo finaliza con un breve resumen y posibles líneas de investigación en el área.

Palabras Clave:
Educación superior; universidades; territorio

Intoduction

The concept of territory has become a central term in current political discourse. In this context, territory is often described as a strategic resource for achieving political, economic, scientific, and educational objectives, among others. Implicitly, this discourse based on the concept of territory not only refers to a specific physical space but also includes the relationships between actors whose particular agendas may, to a greater or lesser extent, be associated with an objective that ultimately results in regional development (Richardson and Jensen, 2003).

From a research perspective, the idea of territory has received similar attention. Across various disciplines, especially geography, sociology, politics, and economics, the rele-



vance of territory in identity construction, resource distribution, and, generally, in the development of public policies has been explored. From geography, the relationship between territory and landscape, the importance of actors and their spatial organization, and the contextualized effects of phenomena such as globalization and climate change have been studied (Jones, 2009). In sociology, the link between territory and collective identities, its influence on community building, and the emergence of conflicts between different groups have been primarily investigated (Tickamyer, 2000). Finally, from politics and economics, the relationship between territory, power, and the distribution of various types of resources has been analyzed, reviewing their impacts on local decision-making processes at the regional level (Lustick, 1999).

Particularly in the field of higher education, territory has become a recurrent theme, emerging as a new formula for legitimizing universities, similar in level to concerns about the applicability of teaching and research (Baecker, 2007). Involvement in the territory now appears explicitly, with particular intensity in Latin American universities, historically committed to the development of their communities (Tünnermann, 2003; Pineda, 2015), as a new mission. These institutions are called to be protagonists in the development of their respective regions, whether through participation in research projects, outreach and community engagement, or the creation of new professional training offerings (Casarejos et al., 2017; Fuentes, 2020; Ruiz Rodgers, 2020).

However, the concept of territory seems to derive its generalization potential in academic discourse from its ambiguity. While this is initially an advantage, the lack of clarity in its definition has resulted in the inflation of the notion, presenting itself more as a rhetorical artifact than as an organizational guideline that effectively allows institutions to consider their relationship.

The Chilean higher education system is particularly relevant in this context. This system is characterized by a high level of academic capitalism, understood as a regime that promotes competition between institutions for external resources (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). In particular, state institutions have been forced to become competitive organizations with entrepreneurial skills through the professionalization of management at the expense of traditional collegial leadership, the adoption of a new public management culture rather than “public commitment,” and an emphasis on the commodification of teaching and research rather than their role linked to critical reflection. As a result, tension arises between governance, guided by principles of efficiency and effectiveness, and territorial commitment guided by the idea of the public good.

In this regard, the legislation on higher education in Chile has gradually incorporated the concept of territory, especially concerning state universities. For example, the recent Law No. 21,094 on State Universities (2018) stipulates that these institutions must carry out their activities “according to the requirements and needs of the different territories and realities of the country.” To date, the concept of territory increasingly appears in the strategic documents of state universities, such as missions, visions, and institutional development plans.

The objective of this article is to contribute to the debate on the concept of territory in Chilean state universities, offering a reflective perspective on its meaning in the current context, linking it to the idea of institutional learning. Given its high level of academic capitalism, the examination of the Chilean case can provide important lessons for organizations in other countries facing similar tensions between new public management and territorial commitment. First, we examine the uses of the concept of territory in the literature on higher education and propose an operational definition from the theory of social systems. Next, we review Chilean higher education regulations, identifying the gradual inflation of the concept, especially for state universities. Third, using the proposed definition, we introduce a model to understand the organizational articulation with the territory of the state sector, based on the idea of university learning. The article concludes with a brief summary and avenues for further research in the field.

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The Paradoxical Definition of the Territory Concept in Higher Education: Generalization through Ambiguity

The concept of territory is one of those inherently controversial terms in the social sciences. Despite being a concept used in various disciplines, there is still no unequivocal definition of it. Beyond being a polysemic notion depending on the involved discipline—natural given the progressive specialization of scientific theories and methods—the idea of territory seems inevitably to carry a contextual reference (Means and Slater, 2021). Territory is always observed territory, meaning territory whose material and social boundaries are defined and redefined socially as such and not otherwise (Mascareño and Büscher, 2011; Urquieta et al., 2017).

This does not mean that the constitution of territory is exclusively the result of the imagination of the observing system in question. Like any observation, that of territory is also restricted in terms of its plausibility: while any definition of territory can, in principle, be communicated, not all of them are necessarily plausible. The definition of territory is plausible when it does not require a foundation in communication due to its self-evident nature, which responds, first and foremost, to the



evolution of respective social systems (Luhmann, 2007). For example, territory is generally defined as a geographically bounded region by political borders, although such a characterization does not necessarily align with the expectations of different actors.

As a result, the concept of territory is positioned in a paradox that combines, following Schroer (2019), material scopes with the possibility of social determinations. Undoubtedly, this paradox reflects, in part, the complexity of territory—understood here simply as an excess of possibilities in a framework of restricted selections (Luhmann, 1998). In this sense, the complexity of territory simply means that it offers more possibilities of meaning than a social system can effectively select. Thus, territory is not just physical and social space but also, at the same time, physical, political, economic, and cultural space, always related to processes of proximity and distance, exclusion and inclusion, power and resistance, and innovation and tradition.

In relation to higher education, as previously mentioned, the concept of territory has become a recurrent theme in the analysis of universities. A literature review in higher education reveals three lines of research. Firstly, the role of universities in territorial development is explored, analyzing how higher education institutions contribute to the economic, social, and cultural development of their regions. This contribution is achieved through knowledge generation, innovation, human capital formation, and the promotion of local identity and cohesion. This research line also investigates how universities can establish strategic and cooperative alliances with other local and regional actors to promote sustainable development (Bramwell and Wolfe, 2008; Tiffin and Kunc, 2011). Secondly, a line of study delves into issues of social responsibility and territorial commitment of universities, particularly examining how higher education institutions can contribute to solving environmental problems. This research emphasizes the importance of university participation in their communities, promoting the strengthening of trust between academia and society in the logic of the third mission and sustainability (Thompson and Green, 2005; Ward et al., 2016; Bauer et al., 2018). Finally, a last line of studies examines the adaptation and management of change in the territorial context, identifying how universities respond and adapt to emerging challenges in their environment, such as globalization and digital transformation, and to what extent their association with the territory is questioned under a scenario of increasing privatization (Brunner et al., 2021). This last line seeks to understand how institutions of higher education redefine their institutional, pedagogical, and research models to preserve their ability to have a territorial impact within this framework of political economy (Marginson, 2011; Bunz, 2014; Labraña et al., in press).



As can be seen from this analysis, the ambiguity of the concept of territory is equally evident in higher education, with this notion being treated simultaneously as an absolutist (material) and a relational (social) dimension. In light of this, we will understand territory as the result of a selection by an organizational system, where such systems are understood as those whose operations are composed of the interweaving of decision communications (Luhmann, 2000) about their spatial environment. This is done to distinguish relevant actors and themes, incorporating them internally into their decision-making process. We will understand, therefore, that institutions of higher education are organizational systems. Understanding institutions as organizational systems does not imply seeing them as a static set of elements but rather as the continuous reproduction of a difference in relation to the environment. Organizational systems constitute their own reality in a self-referential manner through decision records. In the case of universities, such records are expressed in guidelines for strategic development, regulations, rules, and other documents related to their planning.

Specifically, for institutions of higher education, the reality of the territory is constructed internally. In this way, territory appears as an objective foundation (despite not necessarily being so!), allowing for the chaining of decisions based on the internal identification of a territory within defined organizational and cultural boundaries (Marginson, 2004).

As we have anticipated, this selection is not arbitrary but responds to internal and external conditions of plausibility. Among the internal conditions for the reproduction of the difference that defines what the organization understands by territory are included the history of the organization, its institutional culture, and its strategic priorities (Clark, 2004; Barnett, 2014; Pedraja-Rejas et al., 2022). Regarding external conditions, the relevance of power relations, dominant symbolic imaginaries, and, especially, the trajectory and agency capacity of territorial actors come into play (Kauko, 2013; Schwartzman, 2020; Brunner et al., 2021). Thus, the interrelation between internal and external conditions shapes how higher education organizations relate to their territory, establishing general parameters for the plausibility of constructions of their relationship with their environments.

This definition allows us to understand the coexistence of different observations of the territory among stakeholders in higher education. For example, some higher education institutions, such as regional universities, focus on the territory from a more local and community perspective, prioritizing participation in the lives of their communities and contributing to the social, cultural, and economic development of their immediate surroundings (Caniëls and van der Bosch, 2011). On the other hand, other actors, such as



governments, adopt a broader view of the territory, focusing on capacity building and generating synergies at the regional, national, and even global levels in the logic of the triple helix of knowledge (Cai and Etzkowitz, 2020). Meanwhile, actors such as businesses and industries approach the territory from a market-oriented perspective, seeking to establish alliances with higher education institutions to drive innovation, technology transfer, and the development of highly skilled human capital (Dooley and Kirk, 2007). Finally, civil society and non-governmental organizations understand the territory from a perspective centered on equity, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability, advocating for greater civic responsibility and local commitment (Tünnerman, 2003).

However, as a counterpart to the existence of different constructions of the link between higher education and territory, more or less plausible according to their respective observing systems, significant coordination problems emerge, especially when establishing a normative definition with expectations of generalization across different areas. In higher education, these problems manifest in the lack of consensus among stakeholders regarding territorial priorities. This lack of agreement can lead to tensions among the involved actors, hindering collaboration and the establishment of robust alliances for territorial development due to the absence of a common diagnosis.

Concept of Territory in Chilean Higher Education

The concept of territory has gained increasing prominence in the political agenda, particularly concerning higher education in Chile. The Chilean regulations on higher education have gradually incorporated this concept, especially concerning state universities. In this regard, Law No. 21.094 on State Universities (2018) defines these institutions in Article 1, emphasizing their “functions of teaching, research, artistic creation, innovation, extension, connection with the environment, and territory.” It also highlights their necessary orientation toward “the sustainable and integral development of the country and the progress of society in various areas of knowledge and cultural domains.” Similarly, Article 4 declares that these institutions must:

“meet the needs and general interests of society, collaborating, as an integral part of the State, in all policies, plans, and programs that tend to the cultural, social, territorial, artistic, scientific, technological, economic, and sustainable development of the country, at the national and regional levels, with an intercultural perspective” (2018).



As seen above, the expectation of territorial commitment becomes central for this sector.

In a similar vein, the National Accreditation Commission (the body responsible for promoting, evaluating, and accrediting the quality of higher education institutions) emphasizes in its new dimensions, criteria, and standards the importance of universities having systematic mechanisms for bidirectional connection with their significant local, national, or international environment. Additionally, it expects institutions to achieve results reflecting their contributions to the sustainable development of the region and the country. In this sense, territorial connection consolidates as a central theme for fulfilling the public role of universities, setting a growing expectation about the need to align the focus of institutions with their regions.

In this scenario, it is not surprising that territory has become a central reference specifically for state universities. This importance is reflected in the mission and vision statements of these universities and, especially, in their institutional development plans, where extension and connection with the environment—whether at a local, national, or Latin American regional level, depending on the institution's purposes—emerge as one of their central dimensions. Accordingly, these universities have undergone intense organizational change processes associated with this dimension, mainly in the form of creating new management units, expanding professional bodies dedicated to monitoring these activities, and, overall, transitioning from a culture that views collaboration with the territory as a voluntary activity, dependent on sporadic academic initiatives, to one that considers it as a core axis of the institution along with teaching and research (Castañeda et al., 2021).

Institutional Learning of State Universities and Territory

It is worth noting that Chilean state universities play a significant role in the construction of a more inclusive and sustainable territory. This has become a matter of vital importance, reinforced through the creation of new institutions explicitly focused on the region (Rivera-Polo et al., 2018; Ognio, 2022). Following the theory presented earlier, we propose a model for understanding the territorial role of state universities. In particular, we argue that if the territory is the result of the selection of a social system about its spatial environment, distinguishing relevant actors and issues, what is distinctive about state universities—normatively in a political philosophy sense—should be the idea of reflection, specifically formulated in the recognition of the contingency of the construction of territory itself, allowing for continuous new spaces of possibility.



As a concept, reflection describes the process of observing the operations of the system within the system, identifying its blind spots (Luhmann, 1998). As a result, reflection allows for the continuous reconfiguration of the difference between the necessary and the contingent within the respective observing system. In relation to our topic, universities identify the contingent nature of their constructions of territory and open themselves to the possibility of modification. This is nothing other than Derrida's idea (2002) of a university without condition, with "the primordial right to say everything, even as fiction and experimentation of knowledge, and the right to say it publicly, to publish it" (p.14).

To move in this direction, it is essential to promote institutional thinking based on difference, not identity. Therefore, it is not exclusively about the proper identification of stakeholders and discussion topics related to territory — matters more directly associated with institutional management — but rather the installation of elements that allow the continuous recognition of the selective nature of such identification. Only in this way can the configuration of the relationship between universities and territory overcome the dichotomy between an absolutist (material) and relational (social) dimension, progressively moving towards the recognition of the contingent nature of this dichotomy and the continuous capacity for reformulation, in coherence with internal and external conditions of plausibility.

According to Senge's pioneering work (1990), reflection in university organizations is closely linked to institutional learning. According to the author, learning organizations have systems that develop their capabilities to achieve desirable results, fostering new forms of thinking and basing their success on joint learning, with a sufficient level of generality, that is, sufficiently shared among its members. In particular, in the university context, institutional learning is defined as the ability to understand and interpret the environment, leveraging prior knowledge but not necessarily limiting itself to it, considering the possibilities of other experiences (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2017). This type of learning enables addressing changes, fosters creativity and innovation, improves performance, and, in general, academic outcomes (Rodríguez-Ponce, 2016).

Applied to university reflection on territory, this learning requires:

- Acquisition of Knowledge: This process explains how organizations gain knowledge about their relationship with the territory. It encompasses various forms of knowledge, including both formal and informal, those properly incorporated into the organizational structure, and those present in the memory of organization members. It is relevant to analyze existing systems for monitoring external environmental conditions, the availability of information, and the evaluation of academic results and their effects (Rodríguez-Ponce and Pedraja-Rejas, 2016).

- **Distribution and Interpretation of Information:** Through this process, information about the territory gains meaning, is disseminated, and is understood by those who will use it in the university. Individual interpretations, associated with initiatives, become collective understanding schemes that are essential for the development of university programs contributing to territorial development (Rodríguez-Ponce et al., 2016).

- **Development of Organizational Memory:** However, knowledge, distribution, and interpretation of information about the territory are not sufficient to achieve a reflective institutional mindset capable of strategically considering the selective nature of the link between the university and the territory. Organizational memory—understood as devices and systems that allow the storage of institutional knowledge—is central in this transition (Souza and Takahashi, 2019). In addition to technical knowledge, in the context of universities, it is crucial to build and develop a collective memory by promoting the participation of the institution's community. Sharing knowledge and leveraging previous experience generate new forms of individual and collective analysis and behavior, capable of identifying blind spots in the existing relationship between the university and its territories (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2017).

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The promotion of reflection, as seen from the above analysis, is a key element in the development of the relationship between state universities and the territory. It enables institutions to face a turbulent environment, characterized by profound processes of external change and resulting internal legitimacy challenges (Labraña and Urquiza, 2023). The acquisition of knowledge, distribution and interpretation of information, and the development of organizational memory, along with the organizational and cultural challenges involved in their internal institutionalization, are central to the development of state universities in this regard.

Conclusions:

Potential of the Territory Concept: The concept of territory holds significant potential for universities, compelling them to scrutinize their activities beyond education and research. However, to effectively fulfill this purpose, universities must comprehend and define the notion of territory in a more profound and systematic manner.



Relevant Research Directions:

Strategic Utilization of Territory: Investigate how universities can strategically leverage their territory to strengthen their educational and scientific mission. This involves establishing closer ties with the local environment, collaborating with other institutions, companies, and organizations for mutual benefit, and reflecting on the relevance of different approaches to building connections with diverse territories.

Challenges in Measurement and Evaluation: Develop and implement methods and indicators to assess achievements in the area of reflection. Measuring reflection is often challenging in organizational change. It is crucial to create mechanisms that evaluate how universities are addressing and promoting reflection concerning their territory. This includes promoting self-criticism, adaptability, and responsiveness to challenges and opportunities in the territorial context within the framework of continuous processes of institutional learning.

Integration of Territory in Evaluation Frameworks: Implement mechanisms aimed at considering territory in the overall evaluative framework of higher education. This serves as an opportunity to encourage self-observation processes within institutions and to examine the extent to which the relationship between the university and the territory is treated reflectively in these organizations.

Moving Beyond Rhetoric: While there is a visible effort within state institutions through declarations, discussions, seminars, and working documents, the main challenge is to move beyond rhetorical statements and promote a profound and systematic understanding of the territory's notion in the context of universities. Developing concrete strategies for establishing closer links with the local environment, seizing collaboration opportunities, and generating positive impact on the territory, while recognizing its inherently selective nature, is crucial. This serves as an incentive for continuous reevaluation in response to internal and external developments within state universities, ensuring the effective fulfillment of their public role.



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Acknowledgments

This article is part of the Fondecyt Initiation Project 11200429 and the Fondecyt Regular Project 1220568, both funded by the National Agency for Research and Development of Chile and affiliated with the University of Tarapacá. The authors also acknowledge the support of the Interuniversity Institute of Educational Research (IESED-Chile) and the Nucleus of Transdisciplinary Systemic Studies (NEST) at the University of Chile.

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